

THE COMIC MODE IN R. K. NARAYAN'S NOVELS

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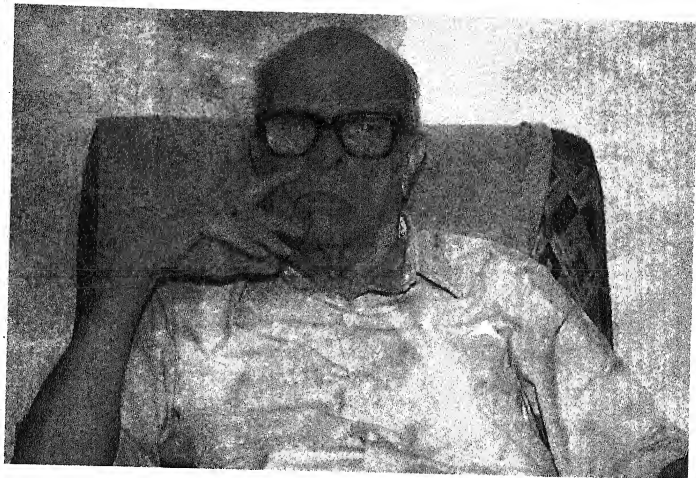
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R. K. Narayan



1906 - 2001

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Prasoon Tripathi
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Preface

Of all the Indian- English novelists of our day, R.K. Narayan (1906 to 2001) occupies a distinctive place by virtue of his wide range of subjects, impressive narrative technique, sparkling wit and humour, and imaginative richness. He is one of 'the Big Three' in Indian English fiction. If Mulkraj Anand is known for his social reformist zeal and love for the weaker sections of our society and if Raja Rao distinguishes himself for his philosophical propensity, R.K. Narayan has established himself as a writer of social incongruities and individual whimsicalities in his novels. The noted English Critic, William Walsh, has bracketed R.K. Narayan with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao for his solid contributions to Indian

English fiction.

One of the sailient features of R.K. Narayan's fiction is the display of a remarkable comic sense of the novelist. R.K. Narayan becomes so lively and interesting in his writings because of his incresing sense of wit and humour, his masterly handling of irony and satire, his forceful portrayal of human weakness and eccentricities. In doing so, R.K. Narayan demonstrates his alertness to the people and their costumes, their ways of behaviour and conduct, their cleverness as well as their stupidity in actual life. He might have created an imaginary world of his own, which is known as the Malgudi World, but his keen observations of men and women and their manners cannot be gainsaid. And it is this unusual faculty of

observation that enables him to become an undisputed king of the comic world in Indian-English fiction.

Here in this thesis, I have tried to pinpoint the fact that R.K. Narayan is a writer of the comic mode of perception and expression. In the first chapter of this thesis, I have given a historical background of Indian English fiction and achievements of R.K. Narayan. As a man, Narayan is quite simple, unassuming and gentle. He is often reluctant to speak on his own writing. He believes that a work of literary art should be self-explanatory.

In the second chapter titled "R.K. Narayan as a Writer of Comedies", Narayan's minute observation and perception of human life has been highlighted. Narayan's outlook is

primarily comic and humorous. It is so in a broad philosophic sense, which enables him to weave all the bizarre events into a butifii vision of life, in which every small event, every small acquaintance, however insignificant and absurd it might seem, turns out to have a meaningful role in the external scheme of things.

In the third chapter, "The Ironic Perspective", R.K. Narayan's Ironic treatment of human life has been pinpointed. In Narayan's fiction, the comic vision operates in a framework of irony. Narayan's Malgudi novels are so many studies in life's little ironies. The irony of life may be defined as the happening of the undesired and the unexpected. Life's little ironies make Narayan's novels tragi-comedies of

mischance and misdirections. Irony can take the form of a situation where what is happening means nothing to the person concerned but something else to those who know what is going on. In his novels, irony is not only ingrained in occasional episodes of the narrative, but is built in phenomenon in plot, character and style.

The forth chapter, "Levels of Reality", deals with the reality of human character and life. A civilized society assures a happy balance between man's elemental nature and his conduct as a social being. Human nature aspires towards the gratification of impulses and instincts which, in reality, are always thwarted. Their being a fundamental incongruity in the scheme of things, man's existential encounter with reality

appears comic. In the novels of R.K. Narayan, the accent is always on the ordinary man, with his small ambitions and passions alternating between the constrictions of an orthodox tradition into which he is born and the carnivals of a free world to which he is driven by his primal instincts and urges. The people in Narayan's world represent varieties of life in all its manner and proportion, facts and fantasies.

The fifth chapter, "Language and Style", examines R.K. Narayan's style from the viewpoint of comedy. Narayan's English is extremely limited. He does not seem to be interested in exploring the fuller and deeper possibilities of the language he is using. His vocabulary has always a very modest range. He has certainly none of the graces nor the dialectic powers

of the language spoken by native speakers of English. His language is very much like the language of the newspaper and the Sunday Weekly and the common use and Indian makes of it for conversation among educated Indians of different language groups .With his limited language, Narayan is yet able to evoke, through all the appearance of stillness and strangeness, a rhythm, the common rhythm of life as it is lived in South India.

Last chapter, “ Summing Up”, brings out the findings about Narayan’s comic vision of life. Narayan is generally considered as a pure artist free from all social, political and religious botherations. He is well -known for his comic mode of expression, ironic bent of mind and witty flashes. Narayan’s

comic mode of expression and ironic attitude to life come out vividly in his fictional writings. The greatest contributions of Narayan to Indian English fiction is his humour. Humour is a gift that flourishes in a native tongue, but shrivels up with the touch of a foreign language. With Narayan however, it flourishes in a foreign tongue and tends to disappear in a native tongue.

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Chapter 1

Indian Fiction in English
and
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INDIAN FICTION IN ENGLISH

& R. K. NARAYAN

A Historical Account of Indian English Fiction

Indian fiction in English, like other branches of Indian -English literature, originated and grew up under the tutelage of Britishers. The growth of Indian English literature is closely linked up with the origin and development of the English language in india. It is generally supposed that the study of English was imposed upon Indians by Lord Macaulay with the sole purpose of the British administration in our country.

In the early days of British rule ,the British had no such ulterior motives in introducing their language as

are generally imputed to them . In 1823, a “Committee of Public Instruction”, appointed by the Government to consider the question of the improvement in the education imparted to the natives, and it allotted all the funds available for the education to the Sanskrit college in Calcutta. Against this step enlightened reformers, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Ram Mohan not only wanted English and more English in India but balanced the advantages and disadvantages (enumerated as 9 the former and 5 of the latter) and concluded by saying

“...the settlement in India by Europeans should at least be under taken experimentally, so that its effects may be ascertained by actual

observation on a moderate scaleOn mature considerations, therefore, I think I may safely recommend that educated persons of character and capital should now be permitted and encouraged to settle in India, without any restriction of locality or any liability to banishment, at the discretion of government..."

Sanskrit and persian which were the chief subjects of study ,were felt to be entirely inadequate Raja Ram Mohan Roy himself founded a number of schools to teach Bengali youth through the medium of English. In the time of Macaulay, the demand for the introduction of English,

as the medium of instruction, and for the modernisation of education became widespread. Macaulay's 'Minutes' on education is a land mark in the history of English education in India.

The novel, the short story and the drama were practically non-existent in the Indian languages before the middle of the nineteenth century. With the introduction of English in India, there was a spurt of translations, and a number of English classics served as the models for the Indians writing in English, and their works were moulded closely on those of the old masters. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee became the first Indian writer of a novel in English. He made his mark with Rajmohan's

Wife, published in 1864. One thousand and one Nights.
by S.K. ghosh and Indian Detective stories by S.B.
Banarjee are the other works of prose fiction in
English. Mention may also be made of Toru Dutta's novel
called Binaca or The young spanish maiden(1878) which
was published after her death by her father in the
columns of the Begal Magazine. Ramesh Chandra Dutta
wrote many novels in Bengali and two of them were
translated into English by the novelist himself. These are:
The Slave Girl of Agra (1909)and The Lake of Palms
(1902).

The novel as a literary phenomenon is new to India.
Epics, lyrics, dramas, short stories and fables have their

respectable ancestries, going back by several centuries, but it is only during a period of little more than a century that the novel- the long sustained piece of prose fiction has taken root in India. One might, of course, say that Sanskrit works like Bana's Kadambari and Subandhu's Vasavadatta are also novels, but the description would not really fit in the scheme of things and besides, these were isolated marvels. For the novel proper, we have to wait till the latter half of the nineteenth century when the western impact on India's cultural front resulted, among other things, in the development of formal written prose in regional languages, first as a functional, and presently as an artistic medium with the help of Indian scholars,

christian missionaries had translated the Bible into the living languages of India, and the prose medium thus brought into currency came handy for the official use, for petitions, records, journalism, and for the translation of Sanskrit classics into the spoken languages of the people. The translation of Western classics, including novels, which followed such renderings, could take the form of adaptation, abridgement, or even the Bottomian kind of transformation . The next step was the composition of original works, in distinct imitation or under the inspiration of Western models.

Perhaps the first novel written in Bangali was Alaler Gharer Dulal (Spoilt Son of a Rich Family), which came

out (after a serial publication earlier) in 1858. However, the real beginnings were made with the works of the great Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94). His first published work, Rajmohan's Wife (1864), was in English. It was followed next year by Durgeshnandini in Bengali, which was subsequently published in an English translation in 1890. Bankim reigned supreme in his lifetime as "the literary dictator of nascent Bengal".²

Kapal Kundala, Vishavriksha ("The Poison-Tree: A Tale of Hindu Life in Bengal"), Krishnakanta Uyl ("Krishna Kant's Will"), Anandmath, Devi Chaudhurani, and other novels appeared between 1866 and 1886, and several of them came out sooner or later in English versions too.

In the meantime Raj Lakshmi Devi's The Hindu Wife was published in 1876, Toru Dutt's Bianca in 1878, Kali Krishna Lahiri's Roshinara in 1881, H. Dutta's Bijoy Chand in 1888, and Khetrapal Chakravarti's Sarata and Hingana (1895). These novels, written in English have for us today no more than an antiquarian or historical fascination.

The beginnings of the twentieth century witnessed a gradual yet steady growth of the fictional form. One of the significant novelists of this time was Romesh Chandra Dutta (1848 - 1909), who occupied some important Government post before retiring into the service of Baroda State as its Dewan for some time. He produced

six novels in Bengali, two social and four historical ones, out of which he translated two into English: The Lake of Palms, 1902 (Bengali title being sansar), and The Slave Girl of Agra (1909).

Romesh left his mark on a numbers of writers who followed him, especially on T. Ramkrishna who wrote The Dine for Death and on Mrs. Swarna Kumari Ghoshal who wrote The Fetal Garland. Some other continued in their works the social reformist zeal of Romesh Chunder; for example, Krupabai Sathianandan in Kamla: A Story of Hindu Life (1894), Bal Krishna in The Love of Kusuma (1910), Sir Jogender Singh in Nasrin (1915), Rajam Iyer in Vasudev Sastri (1905), and

A. Madhavan in Thillai Gobindan(1916). These novels are merely historically valuable, and they display very little originality and authenticity.

One distinguished name to be mentioned here is that of Rabindranath Tagore, a prolific writer with at least two hundred songs , several plays and numerous novels to his credit. This would be a mere repetition of a self-evident truth to state that Tagore, who hailed from an aristocratic and affluent Bengali family, wrote most of his work origionally in Bengali , but some of his novels have since been rendered into English: The Home and the World (1919)The Wreck(1921)and Gora(1923), all of which are socially relevant and thought provoking.

Through these novels, Tagore has conjured up the vision of the modern India.

While English prose for social and political purposes was written by Indians from the earliest times with a rare force, an eloquence and effectiveness, much later came the excellence in the writing of creative prose than in the writing of verse. But, despite its late start, the novel has gone far ahead of poetry both in quantity and quality. It was only with the Gandhian struggle for freedom that the Indian English novel really came to its own. The ideals of the Indian struggle for freedom are reflected in such novels as K.S. Venkataramani's Murugan, The Tiller (1927) and Kandan, The Patriot

(1932) With the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (1935) and Coolie (1936) and Raja Rao's Kanthapura (1938), the novel in English may be said to have come of age . Today the Indian novelists writing in English are large in number. Besides Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, three fore most writers of Indian fiction in English ,there are also K. Nagrajan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgaonkar, Khushwant Singh, Bal Chandra Rajan, Kamla Markandaya and Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, Shashi Deshpande, and a host of others.

'The Big Three'

The time was now ripe for the emergence of a few

talented Indian - English fictionists who could lift the novel form the International status and universal recognition. The three names usually mentioned in literary circles in this context are : Mulk Raj Anand(1905), R.K. Narayan (1906), and Raja Rao (1909). They are known as 'the Big Three', an epithet coined by the noted English critic, William Walsh. Speaking of 'the Big Three' Walsh writes:

" it is these writers who defined the area in which the Indian novel was to operate . They established its assumptions, they sketched its main themes, freed the first models of its peculiar logic . Each of them used an easy,

natural idiom which was unaffected by the opacity of a British inheritance . There language has been freed of the foggy taste of Britain and transferred to a wholly new setting of brutal heat and brilliant light” .³

Of these three novelists, Mulk Raj Anand is wholeheartedly devoted to the simple life of villagers, whose poverty and caste -feeling touch him deeply. He is equally concerned with orphans, untouchables, and urban labourers, and in this he is not much different from Charls Dickens and H.G. Wells. There is a strong touch of humanism in his writings; he comes out in them as a ‘semi-maxist’ and a social reformist. Even politics and

propaganda are not excluded from his works . His Lalu trilogy consisting of The Village(1939), Across the Black Waters (1940) and The Sword and the Sickle (1942) , and the most recent work, The Seven Ages of Man (still in the process of publication) , display the man behind his writing ,and in them we have unmistakable confessional strands and leanings. He began his career with Untouchable (1939) and has since consolidated his position unshakably.

R.K. Narayan , whose first novel Swami and Friends, appeared in 1935, is the most unpretentious and unassuming. His first novel Swami and Friends ,was declared satisfactory by a young collegian. This boy later became a constant critic and adviser of Narayan:

“ Years ago when I wrote my first novel Swami and Friends and found none to read it, a very young-college friend came forward to go through the manuscript , he read and certified it as readable which was very encouraging.”⁴

He always creates a convincing situation to suit his characters who move about and live in the limited region of Malgudi, recalling immediately Hardy to our minds. Narayan is a pure artist who does not bother about social or political doctrines, nor is he bothered about the contemporaneity of his subject-matter. Sex does not make an appealing theme to him. With the possible exception of Mr. Sampath, all his novels are invariably qualitative

and well-executed. Narayan writes in a lucid and simple style and prefers easy and natural expression to intricate and complex ones (in this he is essentially different from Raja Rao). In Waiting for Mahatma (1955), he does not accommodate the 'Quit India' movement, but elsewhere he does not concentrate on political affairs. The Dark Room (1938) deals with the miserable life of an Indian Woman, Savitri, in the compassionless company of her husband, Ramani. The Financial Expert (1952), and The Guide (1958) are the two grand successes of Narayan as a novelist. Of these two, the first one graphically portrays the rise and fall of Margayya as the financial agent, while the second one depicts the romantic and dubious role of

Raju as a guide of tourists like professor Marco and his wife Rosie (later the beloved of Raju). Narayan's comic propensity stands him in good stead and saves him sufficiently from an undue interference in the affairs of his creations. Graham Greene in the introduction to The Financial Expert remarks, "....the life of Malgudi-never ruffled by politics proceeds in exactly the same way as it has done for centuries, and the juxtaposition of the age-old convention and the modern character provides much of the comedy".⁵ Because of the apparent usurpation of the traditional values and the life- style by the new civilization , the various human situations portrayed in these novels border on pathos. But the old values eventually

reign supreme, and the modern ones only touch the fringes of the society and never really penetrate to the core. After the storm is over, characters return to what Chandran calls in "The Bachelor of Arts, "a life freed from distracting illusions and hysterics."⁶ Narayan's comic prosperity stands him in good stead and saves him sufficiently from an undue interference in the affairs of his creations. It is this that makes him a detached observer of human life and activities. This also keeps him distinct and distinguished from other English novelists.

Raja Rao, whose fictional corpus is The Chessmaster and His Moves(1987), is very meagre as compared to that the Mulk Raj Anand or R.K. Narayan,

makes “a remarkable triad”⁷, as Prof. Iyengar puts it. He has produced just five novels and two collections of short stories to date: Kanthapura(1938), The Serpent and the Rope(1960), The Cat and Shakespeare(1965), and Comrade Kirillov(1976- all novels) and The Cow of the Barricades(1947- A Book of Short Stories). Raja Rao is not a committed writer like Mulk Raj Anand, nor is he a carefree, humorous talent like R.K. Narayan. He is rather poetic, metaphysical, Lawrentian. His Kanthapura is a village located in South India, and the story is told here in the traditional way by a gradam.

Now something more about ‘the Big Three’ In the first place the title itself is somewhat pinching and painful,

as this exalts a few Indian novelists over a score of others who are presently actively engaged in the production of Indian English fiction. The most unfortunate thing is that some Indian schools like Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah and prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar also fell into this well- laid trap . Why did they exclude Bhabani Bhattacharya from this list if 'chronology' was the measuring rod for them ? and if the considerations were merit and recognition, why did they leave out a talented novelist like Kamala Markandaya? Why not to swell this member to 'four' ?Of course, like 'the four wheels' of the English novel. And if Prof. Narasimhaiah and M.K. Naik be overwhelmed by the technical

accomplishments of Raja Rao, what has hindered them from according the right ful position to Kamala Markandaya or Bhabani Bhattacharya ?

R.K. Narayan's Novels and his comic Sense

R.K. Narayan is regarded as one of the greatest of Indian writers in English. He is the most artistic of the Indian novelists, his sole aim is being to give aesthetic satisfaction, and not to use his art as a medium of propoganda or to serve some social purpose , as in the case of Mulk Raj Anand.

Narayan is definitely a prolific and eminent writer ; he has published eleven novels, over two hundred short stories and four books of non fiction. He has received a

number of literary awards and distinctions: National Prize of Indian Literary Academy , 1958; Sahitya Academy on The Guide (1960); Padma Bhushan, 1964; National Association of Independent School Award, 1965, Litt.D.: University of Leeds, 1967, D. Litt. Delhi University, 1973.

‘Comedy’ is notoriously difficult to define. Only in the history of drama has it taken any specific formalized shape with sharply recognizable conventions of presentation and sub-division of comedy of humour, manners, ideas etc. L.J. Potts in Comedy sees ‘comedy’ as “a literary mode of thought” and tragedy as the opposite mode.⁸ It can be found in a variety of forms and is, as such, at home in the novel, the short story, and the essay,

as in the drama. R.K. Narayan is the modern Indian novelist who has most consistently embodied the comic spirit. Though he approaches tragedy in The Guide (1958), and Grateful to Life and Death (1945), even these rather sombre works are threaded with wit and humour, and in such books as The Man-Eater of Malgudi, The Printer of Malgudi, we have a steady refusal to deviate from the strictly comic mode of thought which finds its expression in abnormal fictional characters who are in tension with the norms of their society. Narayan's vision of life is essentially comic, and its characteristic notes are struck in the very first novel, Swami and Friends. In the very beginning of the novel, the swami stands face to

face with his teacher examines his face closely, criticises it , and this deflation of the teacher is highly comic. As in Swami and Friends so also in The Bachelor of Arts, we get a deflation of the professor. Equally incongruous and ironical is the title of the novel Waiting for the Mahatma, in which there is no one who waits for the Mahatma or for his guidance in economic or social fields, but Sriram and Bharti merely wait for his blessings to get married. In this very novel, we get the tragi-comic farcical scene in which the dead grand mother of the hero comes to life on the cremation ground and has to be sent to Benaras, because customs forbid her return to her native village.

The statement that R.K. Narayan is essentially a comic writer requires some elaboration, modification and illustration. He himself has pointed out in the Atlantic Monthly : that in his view nationalism in India has prevented the rise of really comic fiction by drawing most of the writers into intense struggle for the country's freedom and by asserting Indian national identity at the expense of the private life of an individual as a subject of literature. Comedy depends, he thinks, on detached observations, psychological probings, eccentric behaviour and statements which are not much in demand in what is propagandist or committed writing. In connection with this, we may note Graham Greene's

remarks about narayan's comedy in his introduction to

The Financial Expert:

"....Comedy needs a strong framework of social convention with which the author sympathizes.... But the life of Malgudi never ruffled by politics proceeds in exactly the same way as it has done for centuries, and the juxtaposition of the age-old convention and the modern character provides much of the comedy".⁹

A survey of Indian- English fiction should not omit a reference to short stories, but these defy classification. The novelists, Venkatramani, Shanker Ram,

S.K. Chettur, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Anita Desai, have all published short stories too. Tagore is, of course, a great story writer. Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Abbas and Khushwant Singh, have all given us collections of short stories. Anand's stories, like his novels, have great vitality, and a story, like "The Lost Child" is something of a masterpiece, tender and deeply moving. Novels and short stories are appearing at a steadily increasing pace, as journals and radio stations need them, and the spread of literary and the popularity of the new mass media have created a growing audience to present a lovely programmes on the air. The future of

Indian- English fiction is indeed full of promise . The recent Indian English fiction has given ample evidence of vitality, variety, humanity and artistic integrity.

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Chapter 2

R.K. Narayan as a Writer of Comedies

R.K. Narayan as a Writer of Comedies

R.K. Narayan's outlook is primarily comic and humorous.

It is so in a broad philosophic sense, which enables him to weave all the bizarre events into a beautiful vision of life, in which every small event, every small acquaintance, however insignificant and absurd it might seem, turns out to have a meaningful role in the eternal scheme of things.

Narayan's vision is shaped by a strong Indian sensibility that precludes any possibility of tragedy, because man here is safely placed in a cosmic hierarchy with relations extending not only to his fellowmen but also to nature and God, not only in time and space but also beyond time and space. In the scheme of things, man

is responsible to God as much as God is responsible to man . In hours of helplessness, God's grace comes to man's help, as it is symbolically affirmed in The Man - Eater of Malgudi (1961). In such a universe, man is never driven to the "boundary situations,"¹ so as to feel completely abandoned. The Indian world-view holds that the world and the various human attachments are 'maya', and failure on the mundane level doesn't necessarily bring an awful sense of tragedy. The Malgudi comedy underlines this traditional Indian belief in the ultimate integration . This also corroborates the views of critics like Potts and Northrop Frye with regard to the comic. Potts believes that there is in man's character a

compelling tendency which seeks integration with the life of society , to merge with others and to be a part of something greater than the individual self:

The conviction that the individual is unimportant except as a part of something wider ; the impulse to mix, and to seek common ground with the rest of one's kind....²

Potts regards this 'social sense' as forming the core of 'comedy'. This social sence is the dominant motif in Narayan's novels. In them 'the social world and moral world are contiguous' is properly conceived in a 'moral world':

Comedy usually moves towards a happy

ending and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is 'this should be, which sounds like a moral judgement. So it is, except that it is not moral in the restricted sense but social. Its oppsite is not the villainous but the absurd.³

Characters like Sampath and Vasu are dismissed because they become absurd in the Malgudi setting. At the heart of Narayan's comedy there is an awareness of absurdity. In his comic world the characters are purged of their absurdities and are integrated with the society.

But through these absurd characters -printer, poet, maneater , guide, financial expert, sweet- vendor Narayan

weaves his malgudi comedy that follows the traditional comic pattern of order- disorder- order.

If the disorder is due to man against his society, the ultimate order in the comic framework is due to man wedded to his society. In Narayan's fiction, man and society are closely related and the bliss that comes at the end is the outcome of this relationship. Narayan's comedies register this movement "from illusion to reality,"⁴ and in the process characters as well as the society are born into a sort of new life.

Narayan's novels can be said to be in the pattern of the New Comedy . The individual traverses along a path of follies and misadventures seemingly throwing the

social stability into peril , and at last expiating for his blunders, returns to the fold of the society. In view of the absurd security of the Malgudi society, the apparent disasters resulting from the unbridled impulses and instincts of the comic hero only serve to build up the comic tension .The narrative implies this sense of social security, and in the context of this awareness the erratic acts and adventures of characters in Narayan's fiction arouse laughter .

In all the chaos and confusion, in all the disorderlines that we perceive in his fictional world, Narayan systematically shapes the emotional response of his readers towards the final end.He, by means of clever

contrivance, weaves the disorderly episodes into a significant framework of moral or aesthetic awareness. The narrative shapes the readers response or attitude, for it contains, as Bradbury suggests, 'a running act of persuasion'.

Bradbury says:

Our means of engagement with that world is through a running act of persuasion which may be stabilished as a 'tone' a rhetorical wholeness or narrative posture devoted not only to convincing us that there is here a whole world operational and worth attention but that it is taken to it.⁵

This 'narrative posture' in Narayan implies an awareness

of moral norms or social manners. And because of the subtle assurance of the narrative posture, the reader is able to laugh at the eccentricities and absurdities of the characters. It is worth while to quote Maynard Mack in this context:

Even a rabbit, were it suddenly to materialize before us without complicity, could be a terrifying event. What makes us laugh is our secure consciousness of the magician and his hat.⁶

Narayan uses irony as a rhetorical weapon to wake his characters out of their dream and thus to bring them back to the fold of society. Narayan does this by an affectionate

understanding of the various existential compulsions which confront his characters .It “accepts life and human nature”,⁷ and in that sense it is different from *Staire*. *Staire* “does not accept; it rejects and aims at destruction”⁸. whereas Narayan’s comedy aims at correction and integration as it evokes ridicule and laughter.

There is a distinct low and mimetic bias in Narayan’s comedy. It operates within a definite social framework with roots in traditional and moral values. The historical and geographical details about Malgudi and the behavioural details of its people convey a vivid impression of Malgudi’s small, docile society .The reader can feel immediately its “weighty ecology”⁹ so that the human

comedy that he witnesses here become a part of his intense, intimate experience. Narayan's comedy is rendered affectionate and intimate. In spite of bearing the satiric venom of Swift, it combines the good humour of Fielding and Wodehouse, the moral awareness of Jane Austen and the humour and pathos of Chekov.

Narayan's Comic Vision

Narayan's comic vision, like the magician's gives us the assurance that all shall be well despite all the follies and misadventures of his heroes. Humour may be defined as the kindly, amused perception of the incongruities of life and the artistic expression of such perception. A humorist is keenly alive to the discrepancy

or contrast between what is and should be, between illusion and reality, between the actions and professions of a man. A true humorist aims at the entertainment of his readers, and he does so by exposing and ridiculing human follies and weaknesses. A satirist, on the other hand, is a moralist who lashes with a view to correcting or reforming it. Irony arises from the bringing together of opposites, and contrasting them. It arises from the use of language having a meaning opposite to the one intended, or in the simulation of an attitude which is to be exposed and ridiculed.

Narayan is the greatest of the humorists among the Indian- English novelists. His humour is all pervasive and

most varied. We get in him farcical humour or humour of situation, humour of character. We get in him verbal humour arising from jokes, jests, repartees, retorts, and by the clever use of language in various ways. His humour often mingles with pathos, and then we smile through our tears. He can be comic even in the moments of highest tragedy. Satiric humour is also found in his novels. He satirises greedy businessmen and money-lenders, extorting house-owners, black marketeers and profiteers, fake sadhus and credulous simpletons, but his satire is so mild and gentle that it is often difficult to decide whether Narayan is being satiric, or he is merely exposing and ridiculing for the amusement of his

readers. By nature , he is a humorist and not a satirist. However, it is to be remembered that “Narayan’s sense of the comic is sustained not by the Dickensian kind of exaggeration but rather, if a comparison has to be made to enlist understanding and evoke response, by the irony of understatement practised by Jane Austen”.

Narayan’s vision of life is essentially comic and its characteristics notes are struck in the very first novel. Swami and Friends presents not only an idyllic Malgudi and the fun and play of its little inhabitants like Swami, Rajam, Mani and Samuel, but also a picture of a child gradually getting groomed to the complex ways of life. The flirtations of Swami and his friends with politics

and the exploits in cricket , their innumerable adventures are rendered in vivid comic details. The children's world of innocence in Swami and Friends stands as contrast to the adults world of wiles which has been more pointedly presented in Narayan's later novels. The comic vision is reflected in the children's simple ways of interaction with a world that is of far serious dimensions. But Narayan's intension is to bring Swami, through various stages of experience to terms with reality. Swami and Friends ends with parting between friends, marking the culmination of innocence reflected in children's lincs. Logically enough in the next novel, Narayan leads us along the carridor of time, to the years of youth. In the

next move, Swami becomes Chandran, the adolescent youth of the college days. The first part of The Bachelor of Arts provides a vivid account of the happy college life, here the character is blissfully ignorant of the various constrictions and compulsions of reality. Narayan's task is to shift his character from the plane of innocence and ignorance to that of experience knowledge.

The English Teacher does not correspond to Narayan's comic design. The action is frequently confined to the domestic scene or more properly, to the husband-wife relationship. In Swami and Friends and The Bachelor of Arts, opportunities exist for the interaction of various discordant forces, for the display of the incongruity which

is at the heart of the Comic.

From Swami and Friends to The Painter of Signs, his latest novel, Narayan depicts life in terms of innumerable aspirations and frustrations, successes and failures, and oddities and idiosyncrasies . He doesn't exclude any particular age group, and within the bounds of the Comic, every stage of life has got its own chalked-out place, reacting to the world outside in its own typical way.

In Mr. Sampath, one finds a rendezvous of all comic forces . Sampath , Srinivas , Somu, De Mello, Shanti, Ravi and many others are frantically involved with one another in bizzare relationships. The characters of

Narayan's novels cannot exist independently .All their Pranks and idiosyncrasies fit amazingly into one another to form a total comic pattern .What John Killham says in connection with Dickens: Pickwick Papers seems true of Narayan's novels too:

The important thing to note is that the characters are only made possible by the story. Jingle cannot exist independently of Dr. Slammer and the widow, of Rachael Wardle and the White Hart.¹⁰

The comedy in Narayan's novels carried a subtle sense of pathos .Both the socio-economic conditions and questions pertaining to man's very existence haunt him -

question such as the silent process of ageing, the temporality of our existence and the futile search for some stabilizing factor in life. For Margayya, the illusion of marriage days no more sustains him.

He had thought that, that would continue for ever. What a totally false view of life one acquired on one's wedding day. (The Financial Expert, PP.23).

And for Jagan, the charm of married life is also long since lost giving place to the forlorn days of a widower. The old miserly landlord in Mr. Sampath dies with his dream of seeing his grand daughter's marriage unrealized. Man by his puny efforts tries to create impressions of

permanence in a transitory existence. The dreams fall flat to the ground, and there comes the shock of recognition, the pathetic awareness of the fragility of an impermanent universe.

A comic vision embraces the multifarious factes of human life . Narayan operates in a framework of tradition and social morality which is much bigger than the individual, his ego and oddities. sooner or later, normal reality takes hold of the situation including the aspiring and erring individuals . Hence man's encounter with the world appears ludicrous. The comic vision always offers the consolation of a reconciliation.

Narayan's touch is deft and often deceptive. It has

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been alleged that he is nothing more than an acute observer. It is only too easy to mistake the deliberately understated nature of his comic plots, themes and characters. Where you expect satire, such as you will certainly discover in Mulk Raj Anand, you will find only comedy, perhaps because Narayan is fundamentally too good-natured a writer to be a satirist .

Nataraj, the youngish protagonist of The Man-Eater of Malgudi, and Jagan the old "Vender of Sweets", are typical Narayan comic creations .Both think they are totally adjusted to the small town unsophisticated Hindu Society of South India. Both practise forms of self-deception which are brought to a critical point where they

are faced with the truth about themselves.

Narayan's comedy does not ignore the sad things of life which are at the very root of human existence. It admits the painful fact of man's living in an ironical universe. The sadness comes from his characters, shaking off their old routine selves, and reconstituting new selves. The comedy arises from their desperate and absurd search for new experiences and new roles, which are sometimes thrust upon them, and for which they are not suited. The complex theme of his serious comedies, in other words is the rebirth of self, its regeneration through a proper process of education . .

This comedy is seen at its fullest and its best in the

five novels representing the ripest in Narayan's mature art: Mr. Sampath (1949) The Financial Expert (1952) The Man-Eater of Malgudi (1961), The Guide (1958) and The Sweet-Vendor (1967). In Mr. Sampath we come across the pure milk of gaiety, in which garlanded priests, with their foreheads stamped with ash and vermillion and their backs covered with hand-spun long wraps dedicate to the gods (but as Narayan pointedly observes, for gifts in cash and kind). Mr. Sampath's third rait studio for the production of a fifth-rate epic applying a millennial poetic ritual is a source of great fun.

Much of the comedy of The Financial Expert, which includes in Margayya probably Narayan's greatest single

comic, creation, comes from this friction of discrepancies .

The clashing of contrasting orders of experience, each probing and placing the other , generates a distinct and buoyant kind of comedy. The Financial Expert is a simple story of success, from door-keeper to director. Margayya will do anything for money, even being religious for it . He moves from rags to riches, from a cotton to a lace dhoti, not really by financial astuteness at all but by obeying the mystifying injunction of the priest in the local temple and by performing elaborate rituals for fourty days to the Goddess Lakshmi, and Goddess of Wealth.

The Guide , rehearses the comedy of Raju,

ex -gaolbird, ex- tourcourier, ex- theatrical agent, now fasting and dying on behalf of the peasants, who in their need for rain have forced on him the role of a saint. Raju has sainthood thrust upon him, and the irony is that he is considered a saint even when he tells the truth. The novel is also full of hilarious fun which arises from scenes, as the one in which Raju and his schoolmates peer into the kitchen of the master and see him cooking, with his wife standing by and giggling. It also arises from such ironic contrasts as that presented by the Mahatama going into the inner sanctum in search of food, throwing away the empty vessels, and explaining the noise to the people by the well- known proverb: "Empty vessels make much

noise", and earning their wonder and admiration for his wisdom. Comedy arising from ironic contrasts interpenetrates tragedy when the Mahatama, dying by inches, is surrounded by a crowd, heartily eating and drinking and making merry. This is the way of life. Comedy, thus, fuses with tragedy, till we don't know whether to laugh or to cry.

Narayan is decidedly a practitioner of serious comedy and he has practised it with a rare success. By using the comic mode, he has shown to us that even the average and commonplace is capable of the highest tragedy. In his tragi-comic novels, he shows that love, beauty, money, prestige are all generators of illusion; they

complicate human relationships and, therefore such illusion must be broken through .It is stragedy which grapples with such serious problems; but Narayan shows that in the hands of a consummate artist even comedy can successfully tackle serious matters.

Narayan's comedy doesn't move to any height of fantasy ,as in the comedies of Aristophanes, nor does it bank explicitly on satire , as Swift does in his novels. His forte is the commonplace- the commonplace events and aspirations of people in a small South Indian town .For this Narayan uses a language that can well bear and provide ample testimony to the reality of ordinary lives. He treats not only individual's experiences, but also a collective,

social experience. It is not only the life - story of Swami, Chandran, Raju, Jagon and others.

Narayan's human comedy bases itself on the comic incongruity arising from man's peculiar reactions to his society. The external world thwarts the desired way of living of the individual, and in this conflict between the individual and the world an ambivalent attitude is generated. In spite of his violation of moral codes of society, the individual is not wholly condemned. This incongruous relationship with the world is a fundamental fact of our existence. Narayan's genial humour, which permeates his narrative, embracing the innumerable small triumphs and failures of life, forms the anchor of his comic vision. A

comic vision embraces the multifarious facets of shuman life.Narayan operates in a frame work of tradition and social morality, which is weightier than the individual, his ego and oddities.Sooner or later, normal reality takes hold of the situation, including the aspiring and erring individuals.Hence man's encounter with the world appears comic and ludicrous. The comic vision always offers to man the consolation of a reconciliation .Man's small villainies, his innumerable temptations and tragedies and the frequent abysses and heights in his life - all these form the totality of life and hence are affectionately treated by Narayan with a humane understanding.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Karl Jaspers quoted in "The vision of Tragedy", p. 5. Richard B. Sewall in his book *The vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959) explains 'boundary-situations' as "man at the limits of his sovereignty-Job on the ash-heap, Oedipus in his moment of self-discovery, Lear on the heath. Here with all the protective covering stripped off, the hero faces as if no man had ever faced it before the existential question-Job's question, 'What is man?' or Lear's 'Is man no more than this?', p.5.
2. L. J. Pott's Comedy (London; Hutchinson's Univ. Library 1948), p.18.
3. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New Jersey:

Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p.167.

4. Ibid.

5. Malcolm Bradbury Possibilities (London: Oxford, 1973) p. 57.

6. Maynard Mack quoted in James R. Kincaid, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (London: Oxford, 1971), p.5.

7. L. J. Potts, Comedy (London: Hutchinson's Univ. Library, 1948) p. 155.

8. Ibid.

9. Malcolm Bradbury, Possibilities (London: Oxford, 1973), p.59.

10. John Killham, "Pickwick: Dickens and the Art of Fiction", Dickens and the Twentieth century, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 42.

Chapter 3

The Ironic Perspective

THE IRONIC PERSPECTIVE

In Narayan's fiction the comic vision operates in a framework of irony. Narayan's Malgudi novels are so many studies in life's little ironies. The irony of life may be defined as the happening of the undesired and the unexpected. In life we expect one thing and get its opposite, and what we get is not only unexpected, it is also the undesired. Life's little ironies make Narayan's novels tragi-comedies of mischance and misdirection.

Irony arises from a contrast between appearance and reality, between what a character says and what he means, between what the character thinks he is and what he really is. Irony can take the form of a situation where what is happening one thing to the person concerned

but something else to those who know what is going on. It involves the idea of an outer meaning for the person concerned and an inner meaning for the privileged observer. Irony is a contrast between what appears to be and what actually is.

The ordinary man's response to the Indian milieu of the transition period becomes naturally ambivalent as he gropes his way between the old tradition and the new civilization. The Indian is tossed between tradition and modernity and hence present himself as a comic figure. The old tradition apparently gives way to the modern; the community temporarily yields place to the individual. But in the course of events the process reverses itself, lending an ironic dimension to the entire perspective. The middle class character

oscillates between the old and the new, ambition and humility, between morality and hypocrisy. His troubles and suffering, his misunderstandings and misadventures are in the end washed out by the cohesion of the community. An optimism, springing from this cohesive spirit of the community or the traditions, embraces all the ups and downs of life and with this optimism in background all the ambitious plans and plights of the individual appear comic. It is only an objective, but to a sensitive artist who can penetrate into the reality of things irony is his chief tool with which he can focus on the peculiarity of the human situation without betraying his personal emotions. Thus Narayan sets himself as a pioneer in the tradition of ironic realism in Indian-English Fiction. In his novels, irony is not only

ingrained in occasional episodes of the narrative, but is a built-in phenomenon in plot, character and style.

Swami and Friends is a plain story about the experiences and exploits of children, placed in the larger perspective of an adult world. Their frequent quarrels and conciliations, the burning of caps and breaking of glass panes of schools as a patriotic ritual of the Freedom Movement, The big launching of the M.C.C, their crazy efforts to create a bigger world by naively imitating a perverted one of the adults, constitute a saga of innocence and fun. As C.D. Narasimhaiah aptly remarks:

What interests Narayan in the brave talk of the youngsters who collected in street corners and echoed the high sounding words

of their elders, most of whom could not have been any more effective than the school boys who employed nationalistic postures to no purpose. It is these that brought forth Narayan's comic genius in fiction.'

The transactions of the adult world in their professed seriousness and in their hopocrisy look ridiculous before a joyous world of innocent children. Swami and Friends stands in ironic contrast to all other novels of Narayan that embody such adult preoccupations.

The plots of Narayan's novels follow the usual pattern of irony-order, disorder, order. From the saga of innocence in Swami and Friends one moves to a realm of adolescent romanticism and recklessness in The Bachelor of Arts. It is only in the dreams and foolishness

of an adolescent where irony finds itself quite swift to operate, because of the adolescent stands in a peculiar position between ignorance and innocence of the child and maturity of the adult. With the unusual topic for the college union debate, 'Historians should be slaughtered first', irony unfolds itself with a hint at the shape of things to come. The tinge of extremity, as suggested by the word 'slaughtered', is ridiculously heroic in this improbable concept, and it is ironic that Chandran, a student of History and later the first Secretary of the History Association, is its prime mover. From a sentimental lover to a world renouncing sanyasi donning an ochre robe and then again to a devoted husband these are the successive somersaults of the comic hero.

The counterfeit sanyasi which illustrates the hide-and-seek phenomenon of appearance and reality in one single role, is a favourite theme with Narayan. Traces of this phenomenon are found in the character of Jagon and in some other minor characters like the old landlord in Mr. Sampath. But it finds its artistic culmination in Raju's role of a saint on which the edifice of the ironic vision of the novel is built. In Bachelor of Arts, Chandran becomes a sanyasi not out of any genuine spiritual realization, but out of frustration:

He was different from the usual sanyasi. Others may renounce with a spiritual motive or purpose. Renunciation may be to them a means to attain peace or may be peace itself. They are perhaps dead in time, but they do live in eternity. But

Chandran's renunciation was not of that kind. It was an alternative to suicide. Suicide he should have committed but for its social stigma. Perhaps he lacked the barest physical courage that was necessary for it. He was a sanyasi because it pleased him to mortify his flesh. His renunciation was a revenge on society, circumstances, and perhaps, too, on destiny. (P. 108).

Narayan, however, succeeds in building up the image of a saint during Chandran's encounter with the villagers. In the background of the reality of Chandran's character, reverential response of the villagers to the sanyasi and the innocent interpretations of his silence create a comic situation. Narayan's ironic technique is to pack contradictory dualities in one single character-either the sanyasi in the role

of a thief or the thief in the role of a sanyasi.

With small modifications here and there, this technique has been applied in all his novels. Ramani in The Dark Room combines in himself the roles of a faithful husband, a father and something of a philanderer; and Srinivas with the metaphysical disposition of his character, also shares to some extent the adventurism of Sampath. In the characters of Marghayya and Jagon, the orthodox tradition and the modern materialism simultaneously operate, effecting a series of conflicts. Margayya, who sincerely believes in all traditional rituals, falls to a craze for money, a feature of the modern civilization that goes against traditional ethics and humility. He reconciles these two contradictions initially for some time to suit his own interests, but is unable to carry it on. The pharisaical sweet-vendor, preaching the sermon of

non-attachment- "Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self." (P.13)- is thickly engrossed in his worldly attachments, in the fondness for his son and in his 'free cash' (p.20). Raman moves from a carefree businessman to a sentimental lover and then finally to a reckless realist. But among all the characters of Narayan, the character of Raju in The Guide offers the supreme level of Narayan's ironic stance. Here is the thief in the role of a sanyasi accepted and revered by the innocent villagers and the Government of India as well as by Velan who knows his true identity. The contradictions involved in this situational irony are soon resolved when the appearance and reality merge together to form a distinct identity- the thief becomes the sanyasi . This pattern is also repeated in the character of Jagon when he renounces this world.

The plot of Mr. Sampath is full of episodes that have little relationship with one another as far as the centrality of theme is concerned, as a result of which no distinct ironic treatment is noticable. But, in contrast, all the events gyrate round the character of Raju, in its various stages of development. Mr. Sampath is to be read either as a story about the adventures of Sampath or about Srinivas's journey to equilibrium and wisdom; it may also be analyzed from the point of view of the relation and interaction between these two aspects. Srinivas shares and participates in Sampath's adventures till he achieves his equanimity. At the same time, Srinivas's metaphysical questionings, his occasional philosophic nihilism, ironically match with the gross material involvements.

In The Financial Expert, the ironic treatment

embraces the rise and fall of Margayya's fortunes. As far as the Indian milieu is concerned, the superstitious spirit of the Traditional on the threshold of the modern, appear funnily anachronistic. The astrological wrangles over the horoscope and tricky manoeuvres of Dr. Pal in order to bring a match of the horoscope illustrate the peculiarity of the transition period. The liberated Modern and the orthodox Traditional stand in an ironic relationship with each other. Margayya's faults and foolishness are treated by Narayan's ironic technique not from the standpoint of strict moral judgement, but with an affectionate understanding of life's predicament. As a consequence, the bitter bite of irony yields place to a mild disapproval or a tender stroke of the tragi-comic. In Narayan's fiction, the ironic stance leads to the attainment of wisdom that helps man to reject the illusions and unites

him to his roots-either in his own self or in his family or community.

The Guide "a remarkable example of the especially difficult genre to which most of Narayan's work belongs, the serious comedy."² In The Guide he treats with extraordinary skill the stuff of tragedy in terms of comedy "and there in consists his unique achievement in Indian fiction."³ The Guide, as far as the ironic perspective is concerned, achieves the supreme concentration of purpose. No episode is superfluous or unrelated to the others and all contribute to the singular theme of Raju's Spiritual odyssey. Raju's life is a cast in a criss-cross of fortunes. He undergoes a process of gradual degradation from an illicit lover to a liar forging the document and then to a fake swami swindling the entire community. But this process is suddenly reversed

and Raju by an extraordinary feat of suffering and sacrifice becomes the true saint redeeming his earlier life.

Irony spans the entire life of Raju, right from his childhood days to the final moments. It not only serves as a backdrop of idyllic innocence to all the events that happen afterwards, but also establishes an intimate relationship with the decisive moments of his life as the Swami. As the Swami, he narrates the story of penance to the villagers, unaware of its ironic turns whereby he will be called upon to perform the penance:

He remembered that not long ago he has spoken to them of such a penance, its value and technique. He had described partly out of traditional accounts he heard his mother narrate. (pp. 95-96).

Raju's successive rise and fall in fortune are curiously associated with the railways. So also is Gaffur with his taxi who has been a witness to many a romantic moment of Raju-Rosie relationship, a relationship which Gaffur himself did not approve of. And now, absolutely in a different context, "Gaffur's taxi drove up and down dozen times a day." (p.214), though Gaffur hardly knows that it is Raju in whose service he is engaged. The same old world returns to him, ironically at a time when the external world has lost all significance for him and he has made an intense journey from without to within.

Of Raju's chequered career, C.D. Narasimhaiah comments thus:

Raju, a loafer getting education from old scraps, guiding tourists, with himself illiterate falling in love with a

highly educated married Indian woman without outraging Indian sentiment, taking charge of her, talking to judge and civilians, going to jail and becoming a sanyasi recognized by the villagers and even by the Government of India-Narayan has done the most incongruous things and made them Credible in terms of high art.”⁴

But even in his mistakes and sins Raju has a debonair appeal of personality that endears him to readers. His meetings with Rosie and Velan turn out to be decisive factors in the sensuous and spiritual chapters of his life respectively. He wins over Rosie by fanning and satisfying her instincts for dance and makes Marco a cuckold. But as William Walsh has commented,

As Rosie succeeds, as her gifts gains recognition,

Raju's status changes. He is less the lover and

more the manager, trainer and agent.”⁵

✱ Their public successes are ironically accompanied by the failure in their private relationships. Prof. A.N. Kaul rightly observes: “... the moments of their greatest public successes are also the moments of their greatest isolation.”⁶ The denouement starts soon and a small blunder of Raju wrecks the entire understanding delicately built between them.

On the other hand, as C.D. Narasimhaiah says, “Rosie is completely free from Narayan’s ironic handling.”⁷ Of Course, the marriage interview of Rosie resembles any interview of Rosie resembles any interview for employment, and appears to be a parody of the traditional marriage negotiations. The ironic vision in the novel emanates from the astounding transformation of personality in Raju’s life.

After returning from the prison he becomes a Swami, or more pointedly speaking the mantle of swamihood falls on him. It is a pure coincidence that he, just after his release from the prison, should be discovered by Velan who has been burdened with the domestic problem of a disobedient sister. And fortunately, the girl gets cured and this confirms the villager's belief in Raju's spiritual powers. And once the image has been built on the rocks of the innocent beliefs of villagers, Raju finds it cruel to break their illusion. In his first meeting with Velan, this has been made clear:

But he hesitated, wondering how he should say it. It looked as though he would be hurting the other's deepest sentiment if he so much whispered the word 'jail'. (p.8).

The casual and thoughtless misreporting by Velan's brother

before the villagers that the swami shall not take food unless it rains ironically conforms to the image that he has been steadily building for himself sacrifices are now demanded of him in the very manner in which they were demanded from others in the stories that he had narrated to the villagers. The mask has outgrown the man:

He had told them, 'When the time comes; everything will be right. Even the man who would bring the rain will appear all of a sudden.' They interpreted his words and applied them now to the present situation. He felt that he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out..... He now saw the enormity of his own creation. He had created a giant with his puny

self, a throne of authority with that slab of stone. (p. 96)

When Raju undertakes the fast, he is pitted not against a vindictive husband, but against the vengeful Nature. It is going against an image he has so stupidly built up himself, and those who will hasten his doom are in fact his most dedicated supporters. If this happens, in keeping with the logic of irony, Raju also has got the propensity to fulfil the expectations demanded of him and in a heroic feat he wipes out the difference between the man and the mask. This process has been presented by an ironic externalization which is-

couched not in words but in a symbol- the crocodile which infests the river by the side of Raju's sanctuary. The crocodile, an archetypal

symbol of hypocrisy provides an apt parallel for the fake saint. Appropriately enough, no one in the village seems to have actually seen the crocodile, though they all know it is there- it is a myth, which even like Raju's sainthood, becomes a reality only in death, for it is seen for the first time when the drought, which is to kill Raju, also kills it.⁸

Raju during his days as the counterfeit Swami, says to the village school-teacher, "What can a crocodile do to you if your mind is clear and your conscience is untroubled"?(p.41). The words return to him to be applied in his own case. Raju's beginning of the ordeal with a clear mind and an untroubled conscience occurs almost simultaneously with the death of the crocodile.

In the final pages of the novel, Narayan describes Raju simultaneously by his proper name 'Raju' and by his spiritual title, 'Swami' and 'Sage' which helps to bring an ironic juxtaposition between identity and illusion and keeps the reader in perpetual awareness of Raju's spiritual conversion. Narayan's irony highlights the values that sustain the sweet old world of Malgudi or of India and at the same time affectionately exposes the small vices and illusions of man. As V.Y. Kantak rightly feels:

His irony becomes something like a new perspective because his sympathies are as deeply engaged by the genuine component of that prototype as his decision is aroused by the imposture often foisted upon it.⁹

Here, as also elsewhere in Narayan's fictional

world, the motive of irony is never to castigate, but to understand life's pleasure and pain, its sins and hypocrisies as well as its innocence and tenderness. In the ironic framework of Narayan's novels, one notices a thousand small revolts and reverses of life; the amazing transformation of a wayward boy and later a swindler into a martyr is not a saviour. "In any case", as William Walsh remarks, his attitude is too humble with irony for one or the other. And that irony, it should be noted, is an irony of recognition, not an irony of correction".¹⁰

Narayan's irony recognizes the queer and complex workings within the individual, as well as his relation to the world without. As William Walsh puts it, "For Narayan, then the very conditions of human growth are individual discrepancy and communal collaboration. It is this double

insight which the career of Raju embodies and justifies".¹¹

The theme of The Vendor of Sweets has close resemblances with that of The Guide. The "die into life" theme is in a way manifested in Jagon's wish, "At sixty-one is reborn" and in his apparent renunciation of the world to see a deity emerge from stone. In the ironic design a sinner is lifted to the sublime spiritual height in The Guide and likewise the hypocritical sweet experience. But unlike Raju, Jagon is unable to take a plunge and he stands exposed with his failing and predicaments. The built-in contradictions in Jagon's character inevitably put him in the centre of the ironic perspective of the novel. He is a puritan taking salt-free and suger-free diet. He preaches to conquer taste, yet sells all sorts of delicious sweets. He reads the Bhagvyad Gita to himself and to his workers, but at the same time manages to

smuggle the 'free-cash'. He combines a shrewd sense of business with sayings and 'sloks' from the Vedas and the Upanishads, to which he turns frequently. In his role as a moral man he looks sad and tender. These two aspects contribute to the unique appeal of his personality. His loyalty to Gandhi is the only motto in his life which guides him through every stage:

If Gandhi had said somewhere, "Pay your sales tax uncomplainingly", he would have followed his advice, but Gandhi had made no reference to the sales tax anywhere to Jagon's knowledge. (p.117).

But the ironic treatment of Jagon's character attributes a subtle motive to his innocence or fanaticism. Jagon, unlike Raju in the earlier novel, is unable to take the final leap and

remains only in the twilight region of spiritual realization. Jagon's attempt at renunciation appears high sermons and low scruples. As Prof. Kantak suggests, Narayan's irony vindicates the traditional values.

The Vendor of Sweets is the story of a father betrayed by his only son, the only hope and solace in his lonely widower's life. Here the father's familiar world of marriage and morals collapses by the licentiousness of the modern civilization. In keeping with the logic of irony, such betrayal or shocks is necessary for Jagon to lift him not only out of an extremely fond attachment, but also out of the small hypocrisies of his life. On the intellectual and emotional planes, Jagon has been aware of a higher mission in life, and the time has come to realize it on the plain of actions. He is, of course, aware of his own failings:

We are blinded by our attachments. Every attachment creates a delusion and we are carried away by it. (p.144)

The Vendor of Sweets is the drama of an ungrateful son and an extremely fond father. At the back of Jagon's comicality one can perceive the injured and bewildered feelings of a father. He flaunts Mali's letters with the pride of the father even though he disapproves of his doings in America and feels extremely broken for it in his inmost heart. There is a deep awareness of the writer whose vision of the universe and of human life is ironic, for an ironic vision unfolds depths of reality. It reveals to us that underneath the gales of laughter there are also cries of pain.

As it happens in The Guide, in The Vendor of Sweets, Narayan's ironic device concerns itself with the religious or

spiritual, and in an allegorical way. To the docile, religious-minded Mlagudians Vasu is a 'demon' and his arrival at once brings in its wake all sorts of chaos. Vasu possesses tremendous physical strength; his arguments have a strange logic that sounds novel and notorious; he is unpredictable and dynamic. He is an extreme individualist and he seems to believe in the superiority of strength as the key to existence. He is not bound to the society by any ethics save his own interests. In the way, he remains in the awesome isolation of a demon, and Narayan carves out the peculiar reactions of the timid malgudians to him in terms of high comedy. Vasu faces the enormity of his own creation. He becomes a victim of his own strength. In Narayan's ironic scheme, his heroes face the challenge from their own creations- Margayya and Jagon from their sons; Raju from

the image he creates; and Vasu from his immense physical strength. He has broken his cot- frame to display his strength as a result of which he sleeps in his easy chair on the fateful day instead of sleeping on the cot with the mosquito-net. It becomes evident that an extreme arrogant individualism, however, powerful it may be, carries the potential of its own doom. In the irony of his death, Narayan has amply suggested his disapproval of Vasu's evil strength and genius.

Even though there are some genuine flashes of irony here and there in his latest novel, The Painter of Signs, yet unlike the earlier novels, there is no definite ironic pattern in which the characters gradually mature into realization and knowledge. Of course, Raman emerges from his sentimental relationship a bit more realistic; but irony which triumphantly upholds the traditions and lifts the individual to a sublime

height is conspicuously absent there. The prolonged love-hate relationship between Daisy and Raman, the decision and dreams of marriage, end ultimately in a fiasco. There are a number of anecdotes in the novel that are informed by an ironic stance. The lawyer, whose profession makes it imperative to practice that art of reasoning depends on astrology to hang his signboard. Daisy is a woman, who has 'a sort of unmitigated antagonism to conception' and who confesses, "Married life is not for me. I have thought it over. It frightens me. I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live except alone. It won't work". (pp.178-179). In the context of Indian Tradition where her chief desire is to get married and make her house-hold joyous with children, Daisy is an iconoclast and she stands in a sharp ironic contrast with the Traditional Indian

Womanhood.

The Dark Room, The English Teacher and Waiting for the Mahatma move away from the usual ironic pattern of Narayan's novels. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly says thus:

Waiting for the Mahatma is an ambitious effort and an impressive feat; but one also feels that Narayan's art now denied the security of Malgudi and Catapulted into Gandhian or terrorist political action- betrays unsureness and perplexity.¹²

Attention continuously and confusedly shifts from the political theme of the novel to the romantic theme and vice versa. Sriram's political hobnobbing with Gandhi's movement and then with Bharti's love carries an ironic tinge as much as Bharti's consent for marriage on the condition of Gandhi's sanction to it. Sriram's conversion from a Gandhian worker

to a terrorist, his sentimentalism, and Bharti's fanatic devotion to Gandhi that reminds us of Daisy, the family planning zealot in The painter of Signs, are all affectionately drawn with delicate irony. To miss the duality of the theme- the political and then romantic- is to miss the subtle irony in the treatment of the characters.

In The Dark Room, the attention is focused on Savitri's misfortunes and the plot is not congenial enough for the comic irony to operate. Of course, Shantabai's shrewd conquery comes for Narayan's ironic banter as much as Ramani's foolishness and frailties. Yet, on the whole, The Dark Room remains a domestic drama like The English Teacher where the narrative moves from the physical aspect of existence to the metaphysical. In both these novels, the small Malgudi town of various forces- of unbridled aspirations and instincts

as well as of taboos and traditions- has been tapered to the narrow confines of husband-wife relationship. In the framework of comic irony the individual rises to fall and falls to be restored to his roots; and in the process the comic incongruity is focused. Follies are discarded, and it is once again a happy reconciliation.

In Narayan's fictional world, there is no agonizing sense of waste and void as in the great tragedies of Shakespeare, no utter helplessness as in some of the dreams of Ibsen, no deep pathos as in Hardy's novels, and even the gruelling sense of suffering as in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand. But there is an amusing sense of life's small dreams and defeats. There is always a sure presence of life throbbing in its virtues as well as in its vices. Against the fixed background of the age-old traditions and a strong

community life of Malgudi, the individual's frenzy, fad or fetish operate, from time to time towards bringing temporary disorders.

Narayan, with a humanist's vision notes that the follies and angularities, the revolts and retreats of the Malgudi folk. He finds them wallowing in their favourite illusions, wooing their ladies, worshipping their gods, running after wealth, making films, dancing, gossiping and doing a hundred other things. But also, along with these, there are the jolts in life that awaken man from his dreams. It is built in ironic device in the nature of things that a universal harmony is there among all individuals and the society for whose preservation individual instincts and ambitions often have to be trimmed. The reader feels relieved and gratified, for all's well that ends well. And this can well be said to be the achievement of comic irony

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Chapter 4

Levels of Reality

LEVELS OF REALITY

A civilized society assures a happy balance between man's elemental nature and his conduct as a social being.

Human nature aspires towards the gratification of impulses and instincts which in reality are always getting thwarted for one or the other reason the celebration of primary impulses is the chief concern of the comic.

As Robert M. Torrance observes, R.K. Narayan is:

Comic not primarily because he is laughed at

but because ----in the root ~~essence~~ presence of komos --

--he celebrates life of body and mind.¹

The comic hero has his own option to find ways for such a celebration, independent of any rational or moral

consideration. This obviously warrants an encounter with the world or the external reality. There being a fundamental incongruity the scheme of things, man's existential encounter with reality appears comic. The conventions and customs of a mighty social order are threatened by the fond dreams of the comic hero. In the novels of R.K.Narayan the accent is always on the ordinary man, with his small ambitions and passions alternating between the constructions of an orthodox tradition into which he is born and the carnivals of a free world to which he is driven by his primal instincts and urges. Narayan's comic hero embodies a paradox: he has been reared by the religious rituals and beliefs of an age-old tradition, and

on the other hand, he has been moulded by the drives of his elemental self. As a result of this paradox, the harmony of form in Narayan's novels emerges from an orchestration of two levels of reality ----the social and the individual. The individual reality and social reality interact to form the comic pattern .The orchestration of realities which forms the comic pattern is embedded in the very process of living the people in Narayan's world represent varieties of life in all its manners and proportions, facts and fantasies.

The Swami and Friends clearly illustrates the boundries of the comic in Narayan's world of fiction .Swami and his friends in their innocence transform the

reality of this world to conform to their childlike fancies and successfully live in their own world of make believe. As the scene changes from an unpretentious childhood to a shrewed and cultivate adulthood, the comic perspective also changes from conciliation to confrontation. The Bachelor of Arts successfully presents this aspect of changing perspectives. In the first few pages of this novel, it is all happy, smooth - going life for Chandran .But afterwards the world becomes increasingly hostile to him .His adolescent yearnings for Malathi and his emotional outbursts are dismissed by a reticent ,realistic world. The events reach a point of fantastic absurdity when Chandran dons the garb of a sanyasi , not out of genuine realization,

but out of some fits of frustration- a situation typical of Narayan's comic ingenuity .But events move and change very fast offering ample scope to the comic hero to display the various facets and possibilities of his character in response to the demands of living.

The comic fiction shows the pathetic plight of man who has been put in a system that demands a massive instinctual sacrifice. This sadistic principle is so much entrenched in the fabric of social reality that man with an untameable nature cannot easily reconcile himself to it. To quote Richard Wollheim in this context, man "is placed in the world in such a way that he can experience pain very readily".² This fundamental disorder is built

into the very pattern of the universe creating a hiatus between the ideal and the actual, between the individual and the society. The comic hero attempts to work out his life in a strange, hostile environment, led by unknown, uncontrollable drives of the self.

In Mr. Sampath one finds a rendezvous of all comic forces. Sampath, Srinivas, Somu, De Mello, Shanti Ravi and many others are frantically involved with one another in bizarre relationships. The character of Narayan's novels can not exist independently. In the grand portrait-gallery of Mr. Sampath exist numerous other comic characters, like the miser landlord who "collected the rent on the second of each month, took away the

entire amount and placed it in Sarayu street post office bank”(PP.7-8), and at the same time professed himself to be a sanyasi who “bathed at the street tap and which was distributed as charity in a nearby temple”.(P-7). In the character of this greedy, pharisaical old man the comic incongruity is self - evident.

Among all the comic heroes of Narayan, Sampath displays his existential potential to the full and till the very end he remains a comic hero, unbeaten and untiring in spite of the hostility in the world around him.

Sampath cherishes an independence of spirit and in this lies his conflict with the external reality. The encounter exposes the comic incongruity; but every conflict has its

inherent pathos. One does not miss the subtle undertone of pathos in the characters of Sampath, Raju, Margayya and Jagon. Various emotions and aspirations of the individual respond to the compulsions of the world in diverse ways. This unequal relationship drags itself to a point where it is no more possible to maintain the apparent equilibrium, and consequently the comedy of it springs to the surface in clear, visual details.

Against the odds of life the comic hero proudly proclaims his belligerent selfhood. The heroes in Narayan's novels suffer from a sort of ego-crisis and all their entanglements are the resultant effects of this crisis. In Margayya's case, money at first becomes an

essential fact of existence ; then it becomes an obsession and perversion . Successes boosts his ego to a point where he considers nothing impossible for him:

He has emmence confidence in him self now,
He could undertake any plan with ease ; he
could shape his son's future as if it were just
as much clay in his hand (P.87) .

The Financial Experts is a master entertainer and a source of enlightenment on the philosophy of money. The book abounds in serious outpourings from Margayya on the importance of much discussed necessary evil of money. The financial expert "who graduates from the banyan tree to publishing ,and back to more elaborate and more

crooked banking”³ .speculates seriously on the role of money in life. No doubt, money is an important means of meeting our material needs , but to consider money as the most powerful and an ambodiment of all virtues is to miscontrue the genius of “gaudy gold”.Narayan in his Diary humorously records about this inevitable evil:

Money should always be a round about hinted at subject between friends , only then it is possible to maintain the dignity of human relations.⁴

Narayan’s genius is essentially comic, and what makes The Financial Expert a great entertainer is its sparkling humour.The whole novel is inter-persed with humorous

situations and witty remarks, with an undertone of sadness. The novel shows how humour emanates from the most ordinary incidents and affairs of life, if one has an eye to catch it. The comic incongruity can be perceived in terms the two phases of Margayya's career-his struggle against the society that loathes him for being poor', and his struggle againsts his son . With the denouement he moves a full circle and is back at his original position , chastened by his experience, wisdom and humility .It is in this sense that Graham Grreene speaks of Margayya as possessing "the hidden poetry and the unrecognized pathos we so often find in Tchechov's characters who on the last page vanish into life".⁵

The poignancy of the tragic-comic clash of generations is more acutely felt in The Vendor of Sweets. The aged sweet vendor, Jagon, is a bundle of contradictions, who skilfully combines his business profits with exalted Gandhian principles. The comic incongruity is apparent in the unique blend of hypocrisy and sincerity in his character. The various urges in his character, that are often mutually contradictory find their own ways of fulfilment; and conflicting though they may be between themselves, they exist in apparently wonderful harmony. He has completely simplified his life, has discontinued sugar, and takes twenty drops of honey in hot water everyday instead. He has also given up rice and lives on

“ a little stone- ground wheat with honey and greens”.

(P-16) He is capable of simultaneously managing both his spiritual and worldly affairs :

As long as the frying and sizzling noise in the kitchen continued and the trays passed, Jagon nothing, his gaze unflinchingly fixed on the sanskrit lines in a red bound copy of the Bhagvad - Gita but if there was the slightest pause in the sizzling, he cried out, without lifting his eyes from the sacred text, ‘What is happening’(P-18).

Through long flashbacks, the sweet past of his adolescent and marriage days is brought to the forefront

of the narration, offering immediate contrast to the long days of his widower's life, Jagon's dreams and ideals are pitted against a hostile world of fleeting time and of fast- changing values. The long nostalgic recollections convey, in poignant terms, life's inherent sadness of time passing away and one's dear world gradually receding with it . His sadness, his existential agony, in a way, becomes the lot of the entire humankind . That is why the reader is able to build an emotional rapport with Jagon in common understanding of life.

In The Guide, such an understanding is made possible by allowing the reader a glimpse into life's mysteries and myriad colours, into its depths and

possibilities .Raju, the reckless and the romantic hero, is poised against a whole set of hard realities represented in the forms of Marco, Velan, his mother, Gaffur and many others .He graduates from a small boy helping his father at the shop to the owner of a railway stall and then successively to a guide, a romantic lover, a fake swami and ultimately a martyr. In Raju's character, the ego-crisis is sensitively rendered. On this aspect of Raju's character, William Walsh comments:

".... the events in the novel also have a thematic significance in that they suggest the apparently hopeless struggle of Raju's submerged individuality to achieve an independent identity. This is why we are aware so often

of a rather frantic quality in Raju's actions and meditations, for all that he keeps up throughout his off - hand, youthfully cheerful manner" 6

The innate urge of man to find a meaning of life, to assert his identity in an imperious world, takes up urgency the character of the comic hero, and the greater is the dynamism of his action and actions and reactions. He can defy the ethical injunctions of the society to satisfy his existential needs. This comic clash with the external reality presents life's depths and colours in a kaleidoscopic pattern.

The tragi comedy of the individual's helplessness in the face of an awful external reality becomes

abundantly clear when Velan, even after hearing the entire history of Raju's life, accepts him as a "swami".

What makes Velan behave so is left ambiguous. But in the figure of Velan, all the weights of the world come to crush Raju and force him to maintain an utterly inconvenient mask. On the first day of his fast, quite in the guideful way of a comic hero, he secretly eats some stale rice. But on the second day, he searches for food in the aluminium vessel in vain. His indomitable ego, which hitherto has been responsible for all his crisis, once again comes to assert itself as a challenge to the pressure of the world.

He felt enraged at the persistence of food thoughts. With a sort of vindicative resolution, he told

himself, " I'll chase away all thought of food .For the next ten days I shall eradicate all thought of tongue and stomach from my mind." (p. 213). With this resolution of Raju, in forsaking a hedonistic life and in accepting martyrdom, the narrative moves out of the bounds of the comedy and enters the portals of a religious drama; but the comic incongruity persists, though now outside the character of Raju. Raju's love, rigorous penance and the chaotic crowd around him are in ironic proximity to each other. They are, in effect, an encounter between an extremely private self and indifferent world lying outside:

... Each day the crowd increased. In a week

there was a permanent hum pervading the place. Children Shouted and played about, Woman came carrying baskets filled with pots, fire wood and foodstuffs, and cooked the food for their men and children. There were small circles of smoke going up all along the river bank, on the opposite slpoe, and on this bank also. It was studded with picnic groups, with the women's bright coloured sarees shinning in the sun; men too had festive dress. Bullocks unyolked from their carts jingled their bells as they ate the straw under the trees. People swarmed around little water-holes. (P. 210).

The human situation is portrayed in a sort of uncanny atmosphere in The Man-Eater of Malgudi. Vasu, the arrogant taxidermist, leads a gross philistine existence. His highly inflated ego doesnot brook any challange, and the humble society of Malgudi can only build a relationship of tame submissiveness with him. He virtually creates a parallel world where he reigns supreme .He has his own ideas and logic that confound our moral sense and the timehonoured social values. He considers marriage to be an unnecessary social institution .For him 'melas' are arranged in our country so that thousands can die on cholera or smallpox or just get trampled as a result of which the population of the

country can be kept in 'manageable limits' (P- 196), and shooting is not at all terrible and it is just a 'give and take' (P-176) between the shooter and the object who receives the bullet . His immense physical strength, his fantastic logic and way of life and the very nature of his profession set him in immediate contrast with the docile folk of Malgudi.

He becomes a menace to the smooth flow of life and has his own will and terms. The spirit of independence has taken an exaggerated form in him and he brooks no moral or social barrier while celebrating the urges of his self. Even though Nataraj is embarrassed and overawed by Vasu, he feels "a sneaking attraction"⁷ for the latter's

spirit of independence and his manly defiance. Nataraj's predicament springs from his transactions with the fantastic Vasu. From the Vasu-Nataraj relationship, the scene moves to the sphere of the community when Vasu decides to shoot at the temple elephant. The comedy of Vasu's relationship with the people of Malgudi is sustained with continuing anxiety till the man-eater is undone by the mere mosquitoes. Vasu revolts against all routine habits of mind, against all accepted beliefs and patterns of human behaviour. With such an attitude his transactions with a normal world produce a bizarre spectacle.

Vasu jeers at all sorts of social institutions. He

belittles the world that does not allow the individual full sovereignty. He breaks the arm of the Police Inspector, flirts with any woman he likes without caring least for the public opinion and shoots according to his whims. In all his actions he brings down the world around him to its knees. But in spite of all his apparent successes, he remains a solitary, mysterious figure. A proper study of his character and his strange relationship with the world, is not possible unless the workings of his mind are probed. This, of course, depends too much on psycho-analysis. But Vasu's conduct and character cannot be explained without it, as very little is known about him. As Erich Fromm

observes:

...the human passions (such as striving for love, tenderness, freedom as well as the lust for destruction, sadism, masochism, the craving for power and property) are answers to 'existential needs' which in turn are rooted in the very condition of human existence.⁸

The characters of Raju, Sampath and Margayya can be looked at with sympathy when viewed from this angle. And Vasu, failing to find satisfaction in the higher levels of life, "Creates for himself the drama of destructions."⁹ Sastri's mythological interpretation of Vasu's death- "Every demon carries within him, unknown

to himself, a tiny seed of self-destruction, and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment." (p. 242) - closely corresponds to this line of analysis of human character. Fromm has summed up this paradoxical phenomenon thus: "....life turning against itself in the striving to make sense of it." ¹⁰

Vasu's response to this world takes up a terrifying form. The awesome personality of Vasu, the docility of the Malgudi folk and a revered Indian tradition facing an apparent threat - all act and react with one another to form a comedy of the grotesque. Various existential problems are posed and not only Vasu, but also Nataraj, the mono-syllabic poet, and others meet these

problems in their own ways. Natraj shares Vasu's libidinal instincts to some extent. He reflects in comic bewilderment on the temptations of Rangi's body:

When I tiptoed back to my place beside the grille, there she was, ready as it seemed to swallow me up wholesale, to dissolve within the embrace of her mighty arms all the monogamous chastity I had practised a whole lifetime. (p.159)

Against Vasu's defiant manner of living a life of instincts, Nataraj, the orthodox moralist looks ridiculous.

In the drama of Malgudi we find life in all its totality, where man tries to assert his status and lives by various designs, however, puny and evil these may be. To

quote Erich Fromm again:

The truth is that all human passions, both the 'good' and the 'evil' can be understood only as a person's attempt to make sense of his life, and transcend banal, merely life sustaining existence.... Even the most sadistic and destructive man is human, as human as the saint. He can be called a warped and sick man who had fail to achieve a better answer to the challenge of having been born human, and this is true, he can also be called a man who took the wrong way in search of his salvation."

Thus, Sampath is basically no different from Srinivas; Raju is very much like us; and Vasu also is like Nataraj in so far as basic human aspects are concerned.

The Painter of Signs follows the characteristic comic pattern that one finds in the other novels of Narayan. Raman's romantic yearning not only face an opposition from her aged aunt, the repository of all the traditional values, but he has also to encounter uncertain responses from Daisy, who remains an enigma for him. He, with his most private longings, builds a queer relationship with Daisy who ultimately proves to be an embodiment of indifference for him. On the other hand, Daisy alternately responds to and rejects her own

instincts. For her Raman represents the emotional aspects of life that hardly agrees with her strong individualistic temperament. Daisy's abandonment of the proposed marriage in preference to the family planning campaign in some distant hilly village is as sudden and absurd as Raman's quick acceptance of this reversal with a desire to drive a nail into the tyre of Daisy's vehicle and with the carefree act of throwing the key into the dry fountain. Daisy's unrealised instincts and her fanatical idealism make her character an entity of incongruities. With the gradual unfolding of the Raman-Daisy relationship, the contours of the comedy become clearer and clearer as the incongruity of the situation

gets exposed. The individual's instincts and aspirations confront an inhospitable reality of things.

Narayan's protagonists are out to assert their identities in the face a cruel world that never comes up to an individual's expectations. Margayya knows that "treated him with contempt because he had no money". (p.11)

It is not only Margayya who has to face the odds of the world, It is also Raju with his instinctual yearnings for Rosie, Sampath with his ambitious projects, Ravi with his impossible vision of beauty and Raman dreaming to marry a woman who pathetically confesses, "Married life is not for me. I have thought it over. It frightens me . I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live

except alone.”(pp. 178-79).

Narayan's protagonists, who are ordinary men and women move out of their ordinariness in their quest to make life more pleasurable or meaningful. They passionately cling to a life that time and again betrays and batters them. Thus, his novels are tiny worlds where the Lilliputian man with his dreams and sufferings is celebrated; where one finds man untiringly limping across the boundaries of life with the beauty and bruises of existence.

A comic vision embraces the multifarious facets of human life: Narayan operates in a framework of traditions and social morality which is much bigger than

the individual, his ego and oddities. Sooner or later, normal reality takes hold of the situation, including the aspiring and erring individuals. Hence man's encounter with the world appears ludicrous. The comic vision always offers the consolation of a reconciliation. Man's small villainies, his innumerable temptations and tragedies and the frequent abysses and heights in his life- all these that form the totality of life are affectionately treated by Narayan with a human understanding of life's complexities. Raman in The Painter of Signs declares that "people are moved by strange inexplicable drives..." (p.64),- a statement that serves as a key to Narayan's comedy in The Painter of

Signs. He explores subtly the psychic depths of man, brings him close to a world outside himself, and from this orchestration of realities comes out a human comedy.

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Chapter 5

Language and Style

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Style is the embodiment of a writer's vision. It is, as David Lodge aptly asserts, "....not a decorative embellishment upon subject-matter, but the very medium in which the subject is turned into art...."¹ Narayan's style embodies the Malgudi life not only in terms of a distinct regional flavour, but also in terms of revolts and reconciliations. Narayan's style becomes an integral part of his comic vision.

Narayan's language belongs to the every day world of ordinary people. It is the language in which the average Malgudians dream, love and indulge in their small wars, laugh and lament. His style gives the distinct

impression of a small South Indian community confined to a particular temporal and spatial setting, their manners and musings, conversation and thoughts, and instinctive reactions to things. In his style, Narayan "displays his own unique signature",² in this matter is remarkably different from other Indian-English writers. Through the skillful use of language, Narayan successfully captures the rhythm of life that is peculiar to Malgudi and its people. Narayan's language is very much like the language of the newspaper and the Sunday weekly and the common use an Indian makes of it for conversation. From the limited vocabulary Narayan has fashioned for himself a kind of diction of common life

for his Indian scene- a medium at which is at once casual and convincing and used with complete confidence.

Narayan adopts the simple style of a storyteller. The narration of very ordinary events in the lives of his characters is done in an unaffected prose, in a 'Plane Prose', which 'should be not too far from talk, and not too near', that F.L. Lucas considers essential for a style of "Simplicity".³ The narrative holds up a mirror to the simple, occasionally ambitious, and the relaxed way of living of the Malgudians. The form and the content exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other providing us with a vivid impresion of life in a very plain matter-of-fact manner without ever lapsing into exaggeration or

exhibiting any emotionalism. Events flow naturally, one out of another, in the same way as they would actually happen in life. During the course of narration, one hardly perceives the presence of the author. To quote Wayne C. Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction, it can be said that Narayan 'shows' but does not 'tell'⁴. Narayan could have well said what the young novelist, Whom Mr. Booth quotes, says:

I shall not tell you anything. I shall allow you to eavesdrop on my people, and sometimes they will tell the truth and sometimes they will lie, and you must determine for yourself when they are doing which.⁵

Whether it is a story of children as in Swami and Friends or a story of an old man as in The Vendor of Sweets, the reader is straight carried into the heart of the scene without any aid of the author or the narrator. He wins the citizenship of this world and emotionally gets involved in the events and in the characters. Any authorial interjection or any comment of the narrator would have conditioned the reader's response creating the barrier between the reader and the fictional reality. Neither Narayan, nor his language which is a 'Plaine mirror', creates this barrier. In Mr. Sampath we accept Srinivas the narrator, because of his close proximity to us. The narrative technique wants us to see things as Srinivas sees

it. One may say that the reader identifies himself with Srinivas as much as Narayan does it with the latter, that "The author is present in every speech given by any character who has had conferred upon him, in whatever manner, the badge of reliability"⁶ Through Srinivas, the human comedy is brought home to the reader. This is made possible by the occasional comments and the philosophical reflections of Srinivas. This technique has sometimes the danger of sacrificing the dramatic tension. Same The Man-Eater of Malgudi, where Nataraj could well have been the narrator because of his proximity to the common reader, no other novel could have justifiably employed any of its characters as

narrator. In The Guide, Narayan makes an innovation in his narrative technique. Through the autobiographical narration of Raju's life from his innocent childhood to the crucial turning -point, we are persuaded to see the joys of his early days, the adventure of his adolescence through his eyes so that his willing martyrdom can be understood in the perspective of the spiritual journey of his life. Through the very treatment of plot and particularly through his delicate irony, Narayan subtly communicates his point of view. Mr. Booth's words may well be applied to Narayan:

Everything he shows will serve to tell; the line between showing and telling is always to some degree an arbitrary one.⁷

Narayan's style is so uniformly simple that the most ludicrous as well as the most serious events are described in the same vein. The language is neither unduly burdened nor are symbols and images employed to add to the poignancy of any particular situation. To capture the throb of life not only in the social context of Malgudi, but also in the deeper recesses of the individual, Narayan uses simple diction and lucid style by means of which one can at once see the surface and the depths beneath. As P.S. Sundaram puts it:

A great deal of his effect depends precisely on the unhurried pace, the even tone, the words which seem to be 'just their declared selves' and yet contain a world of irony.⁸

Narayan's contemporary novelists convey the specific feel of the life that depict through various experiments and innovations. Mulk Raj Anand, for example, largely depends upon literal translation of native phrases, proverbs and slangs, direct presentation of Hindi words like 'angrez log' 'thappar' etc. to achieve an effect of realism, generally pertaining to proletarian life. Raja Rao experiments with sentence-structure in order to create the particular rhythm. In contrast to Anand and Raja Rao, whose styles are conspicuous by their easily discernible artifice, Narayan uses a simple style. The irony in his works is subtly fused into this simplicity to form a total vision of life. This becomes possible

because "his irony is nothing but an honest recording of facts, without any colouring of conventional sentiment."⁹

The deep sense of humour which pervades all his novels springs from the recognition that all misfortunes are the consequences of our silly ideas and ambitions and can be accepted not with despair, but as a positive influence on all our characters. The discomfiture of the individual is mainly of his own doing, resulting from his absurd aspirations in a limited world. Thus "humour may be defined as the sense within us which sets up a kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the expression of that sense in art".¹⁰ Not only the comic hero's confrontation with an unfriendly universe and the

corresponding comedy is depicted; but also are presented the numerous peculiarities of other men and women, their oddities and angularities in doing the various transactions of life. Narayan's comic vision not only deals with the joyous sides of life, but also with its serious and painful aspects. In spite of the occasional sorrows and sufferings in his novels, Narayan's world does not present any picture of gloom and despair, as the comic vision diffuses the assured warmth of life.

Narayan's prose-style is of a home-grown variety. For him "English is an absolutely swadeshi language"¹¹ Narayan's medium, "a Bharat brand of English", is eminently suited to Indian conditions. He believes that

English has had for a long time "a comparatively confined existence in our country chiefly in the halls of learning, justice or administration." Narayan's language is so simple, so bare and bald that one does not feel it to be a foreign language, equipped as it is with its limited vocabulary and its limited patterns of sentences, mostly having subject + verb + object sequence-the kind of language our college students would love to emulate. Narayan's style is impressive when fused with humour, but on other occasions it verges on banality, becomes uninteresting, monotonous, even tiring. P.S. Sundaram, who is otherwise enlogical of Narayan, concedes that the novelist could have done better by avoiding "a certain

staleness of language, lifelessness and cliches."¹²

Consider, for example the use of 'I' in The Guide:

I was losing a great deal of my mental relaxation. I was obsessed with thoughts of Rosie. I revelled in memories of the hours I spent with her last or in anticipation of what I'd be doing next. I have several problems to contend with. Her husband was the least of them. He was a good man, completely preoccupied, probably a man with an abnormal capacity for trust. But I was becoming nervous and sensitive and full of anxieties in various ways. Suppose, suppose-suppose? I myself could not

specify . I was becoming fear- ridden. I could not even sort out my worries properly. I was in jumble. I was suddenly seized with fear, sometimes with a feeling that I did not look well enough for my sweetheart. Sometimes I felt I was in rags.¹³

Narayan's style encompasses many diverse facets of life and experience, which are all subject to one Malgudi ethos that is constant or eternal in spite of the seeming changes. His canvass is limited in the sense that he treats a small group of people in a small geographical setting; but at the same time he gives details of the innumerable equation in which they exist

with one another and with the society.

Since Narayan's main concern is not with any social documentation, but with the depiction of the comic side of life, he has to provide an authentic locale in which he has to treat men and women in their various manners and moods. In Narayan's fiction there is no prolonged description of natural scenery. The topography has been rendered clear and vivid to the extent that it serves a meaningful role in the human drama. The Sarayu river is as much associated with the childhood play of Swami and his friends as with Raju, Jagon, Raman and so many others. Narayan is more concerned with the details of human actions, and the small geographical

descriptions provide necessary authenticity to these actions. The river, the hills, the statue and the streets together with the Malgudians and their thousand small events and aspirations provide a vivid rendering of life, a community existence bound not only to one another, but also to the mute Mempi hills and the Saryu river in an age-old emotional attachment.

In order to create a successful fictional illusion, the locale is to be properly identified. Narayan provides all the details of a traditional society in transition- the age-old superstitions, gods, and grandmothers, the cricket club, the film actress and the family planning. Simultaneously, the values that sustain the Malgudi

society are understood implicitly as the plot advances. By the technique of 'formal realism' Narayan provides authenticity as well as credibility to his creations. This helps in directing all the narrative efforts of Narayan towards, what Malcolm Bradbury calls, 'the persuasive ends' of the novel:

...the novelist undertakes so to shape and use the fictional transaction as to elicit from himself and the reader, the highest sense of meaning, relevance, signification, of variation and richness but also of concord and elegance....¹⁴

Narayan's sensibility operates on various levels of

human experiences and he does it in a style that can be called 'neutral'. He draws from the vast spectrum of life - from the ordinary details of daily dradgeries to high ambitions and passions, and all these are shaped and moulded by the comic sensibility of Narayan to find their due places in the Malgudi comedy. All these contribute to the unified impression of the comic. It is made possible by Narayan's extraordinary sensibility. Narayan's art takes cognizance of that the fact that "Some of the most interesting experiments of which its capable are hidden in the bosom of common things."¹⁵ Narayan chooses a style which is in perfect harmony with such a theme, a style that is simple yet dignified and graceful.

Prof. V.Y. Kantak compares Narayan's prose style to a one-stringed instrument. He also underlines Narayan's lack of interest "in exploring the fuller, deeper possibilities of the language."¹⁶ Narayan's style is indeed like an old, a rickety, wooden spinning wheel squeaking and rattling noisily at a monotonous pace. While Kantak diagnoses correctly that Narayan's instrument fails to satisfy the reader because of its lack of amplitude, Meenakshi Mukherjee eulogically justifies the appropriateness of the instrument to suit "the simple honesty of Narayan's vision."¹⁷ However, the fact is that the simplicity of his prose-style originates not from his simple vision but from his incapacity to write a

multi-dimensional prose.

Narayan's language misses a dimension. Narayan is a prosaic writer who may wax humorous on seeing simple, uninteresting objects or incidents, but goes blank when some poetic subject comes into his ken.

Narayan's English is extremely limited. His vocabulary has always a very modest range. Word or phrase rarely glints with compression or suggested meanings. They are just their own declared selves. The sentence has a certain structural monotony. It is always the same subject-predicate-object complement pattern with an occasional appendage of phrase or clause or with an occasional inversion. He has certainly none of the

graces nor the dialectic power of the language spoken by native speakers of English. Nor do we discern anything like the influence of an intimate habitual contact with English literature as is the case with those writers who have had a dominant academic background. In that respect, and for lack of poetic element, his language is extremely impoverished and limited.

Narayan's language is very much like the language of the newspapers and the Sunday weeklies. It is of common use that an Indian makes of it for conversation among educated groups. From the limited vocabulary, Narayan has fashioned for himself a kind of diction of common life for his Indian scene—a medium which is at

once, casual and convincing and used with complete confidence. Narayan's language is beautifully adapted to communicating Indian sensibility. But when a more complex effect is attempted, as in The Guide where the situation has a certain intensity, one is not always sure that the language is equal to the task. We seem to be left in doubt now to take in what is presented, whether to respond in sympathy or in comic detachment.

A sense of good humour informs Narayan's narration. In a study of "Good humour and Gaiety," F.L. Lucas remarks, "Johnson has summed up in two words that charm of Falstaff which covers (on the stage at least) all his sins- "perpetual gaiety,".¹⁸ There is in

Raju's character this 'perpetual gaiety' which springs from the comic defiance of all his misfortunes and which endears him to readers. That is why the moral censure for Raju's sins and mistakes is not so immediate and severe. This warmth of life can be perceived in all his characters in varying degrees.

Narayan views life's lapses not with any missionary benevolence and zeal, but with the understanding and wisdom of an artist who admits life's various compulsions and whose vision of life is essentially comic. Hence in his novels, the treatment of any episode or of any character hardly moves to an extreme. Even Vasu, the man-eater is very casually

dismissed. The narrative treatment always keeps to the straight middle path, neither becoming chivalric nor churlish. His language has the charm and magic of ordinary speech that persuades us to the fictional reality because of our intimate kinship with the language.

Good humour is a way of living where life's occasional sorrows and sufferings are not only accepted but also are transmuted into meaningful experiences. A sportive spirit dominates over the defeats and disillusionments of life. This sense of good humour pervades all the descriptions of Malgudi life where man's sins and mistakes, even though disapproved of, are also loved, for these sins and mistakes are intensely

human. The character of Sampath, Raju, Jagon, Margayya and others are affectionately drawn. Humour in Narayan's novels serves as aesthetic purpose in terms of shaping the reader's response to various situations-capturing nostalgically a lost of childhood in Swami and Friends and an adolescence in The Bachelor of Arts, disapproving the pseudo values of the modern civilization in The Financial Expert and The Vendor of Sweets, realizing the various compulsions of life with Raju in The Guide, and partaking of the timidity innocence of ordinary humanity and negating an aggressive individualism in The Man-Eater of Malgudi.

Narayan's plots move in a pattern of

order- disorder-order, and this pattern becomes a "part of his world-view". This 'world-view' is typically Indian as it owes to our traditional concepts of creation. The forces of Evil which from time to time appear to the world disturbing its peace and stability are ultimately undone by themselves or are destroyed by the Incarnation. The stability returns with a renewed assertion of moral and spiritual values. This theme is recurrent in Narayan's novel with an astonishing degree of accuracy. But while the battle is fought between the force of Evil and the force of Good on an ethical plane, on an existential plane of focus is on Man's comic predicament. With the exception of The Guide, Narayan's novels evoke a

feeling of traversing a circular path of life's various experiences, reaching at last, the ordered world at the beginning. That is why most of his novels do not have decisive conclusions, like the one in The Guide.

Narayan's comedy does not move to any height of fantasy as in the comedies of Aristophanes, nor does it bank explicitly on satire or swift does in his novels. His forte is the commonplace- the commonplace events and aspirations of people in a small South Indian town. For this Narayan uses a language that can well bear and provide ample testimony to the reality of ordinary lives. He treats not only the individual's experiences, but also a collective, social experience. It is not only the life-story

of Swami, Chandran, Raju and Jagon and others; It is the saga of vast Malgudi experiences. He portrays the diverse experiences of average human existence-dreams, anxieties, actions, frustrations and so on in a manner in which, ".... it is not the phrase that lingers in the memory as the thing itself.... words are merely a plain glass through which one sees the things."¹⁹

Narayan's style encompasses many diverse facets of life and experience, which are all subject to one Malgudi ethos that is constant or eternal in spite of the seeming changes. His canvass is limited in the sense that he treats a small group of people in small geographical setting; but at the same time he gives details of the innumerable

equations in which they exist with one another and with the society.

Narayan not only focuses on the universal through the particular or tells a story and conveys an allegorical meaning as in The Man-Eater of Malgudi but also takes the deepest human level. His human comedy bases itself on the comic incongruity arising from man's peculiar reactions to his society. The eternal world thwarts the desired way of living of the individual and in this conflict between the individual and the world, an ambivalent attitude is generated. In spite of his violation of the moral codes of society, the individual is not condemned. This incongruous relationship with the world

is a fundamental fact of our existence. Narayan's genial humour, which permeates his narrative, embracing the innumerable small triumphs and tragedies of life, forms the anchor of his comic vision.

The novels of Narayan illustrate the fact that despite all the odds and frustrations we encounter and experience, life has an indefatigable persistence and charm of its own. Within the bizarre events of Malgudi, Narayan subtly focuses on the beatific side of human life. As Narayan's comic vision embraces an intense humanism, his comic mode constitutes of the grace of a language of the every day world, of a style that simply but truthfully tells the story of the common humanity in the

small town of Malgudi. Thus, his style while embodying his vision becomes an inalienable part of it.

Indeed, Narayan lacks a comprehensive vision, a right perspective or a philosophy of life embracing the whole universe. He lives in the moment and things for the moment. His jokes and witty remarks tickle the reader, create a momentary ripple and are forgotten. So are the episodes, incidents in his novels. These are selected not with a view to a preconceived effect of a work in mind, as Poe would have liked, but on the spur of the moment from what comes within the range of his myopic vision. In The Guide, Narayan has introduced sensational objects and incidents often found in any popular Indian movie:

Cobra dance, elephants and tigers love triangle, seduction, court scenes, etc. The hero, too, is a typical bahurupia- a multi-co-loved, ever-changing, chameleon like personality which tickles and pleases the common masses but baffles, even irritates the serious fiction-reading public and the literary critic. On such occasions, Narayan appears like a garland-maker who keeps the needle and the thread ready to weave with it any kind of flowers that come-handy rose, chrysanthemum, dahlia, not excluding cauliflower and cabbage for comic purposes but without design or pattern, and without discarding poorer variety even when the better ones happen to be available in abundance at a later stage.

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Chapter 6

Summing Up

SUMMING UP

R.K. Narayan holds a distinctive place in contemporary Indian English fiction. He is counted as one of 'the Big Three' in this realm. If Mulk Raj Anand is usually remembered for his socialist leanings and marxist attitudes and if Raja Rao is acclaimed as the most vociferous exponent of Indian religious thoughts and metaphysics, R.K. Narayan is generally considered as a pure artist free from all social, political and religious botherations. He is well-known for his comic mode of expression, ironic bent of mind and witty flashes.

Narayan's comic mode of expression and ironic attitude to life come out vividly in his fictional writings. He has written dozen novels, eight volumes

of short stories to this date. He is definitely a very prolific writer, imbued with a soothing sense of humour, gentle touch of comedy, refining taste of irony. And it is this remarkable sense of humour and comedy which keeps him apart from others in Indian English novelist. In this matter the only other names that come to our minds immediately are G. Desani in his All About H. Hatter (1948) and Arundhati Roy in her The God of Small Things (1997). As such a study of Narayan's novels from the viewpoint of his comic mode of perception is both fruitful and rewarding.

Narayan is a prolific and eminent writer. He has received a number of literary awards and distinctions: National prize of Indian Literary Academy in 1958, Sahitya Academy Award on The Guide in 1960; Padma

Bhushan in 1964; National Association of Independent School Award in 1965; Litt.D. from the University of Leeds in 1967; D. Litt. from the Delhi University in 1973.

AS a man, Narayan is quite simple, unassuming and gentle. He is often reluctant to speak on his writings. He believes that a work of literary art should be self-explanatory. It should also be not confused with reality as in it everything passes through the crucible of imagination. Its incidents and characters are deeply rooted in the world of fiction. The Guide, therefore, need not be regarded as a "typical" novel:

I had to repeat here, and later, everywhere that a novel is about an individual living his life in a world imagined by the author, performing a set of actions (up to limit)

contrived by the author. But to take a work of fiction as a sociological reality or a social document could be very misleading. My novel The Guide was not about the saints or the pseudo-saints of India but about a particular person.¹

Thus, this novel deals with "a particular person".

The greatest contribution of Narayan is his humour. In this respect he has given to Indian English Literature What Mark Twain has given to the American. Humour is a gift that flourishes in a native tongue but shrivels up with the touch of a foreign language. But with Narayan it flourishes in a foreign tongue and tends to disappear in a native tongue. His humour is a magnet that attracts every reader, a light

that brightens a thousand faces, and a refreshing cool shower of rains that kindles the drooping spirits of people and fills them with a promise of new life. In characterization, in situations, in dialogues, in portraying the gulf that exists between illusion and reality, Narayan brings his humour in full play. He discovers something odd in what is ordinary, quaint and queer in what is natural and familiar, and gives a comic twist even to what might otherwise have been serious issues of life. His is the humour of the distorted mirror that exaggerates one or more of one's facial features- now nose, now eyes, now lips, diminishing others, and in the process creates a picture funny to the childlike pleasure-seekers but no less meaningful to the adult imagination.

The deep sense of humour which pervades all his novels and springs from the recognition that our misfortunes are the consequences of our silly ideas and ambitions and can be accepted not with despair, but as a positive influence on our characters. The discomfiture of the individual is mainly of his own doing, resulting from his absurd aspirations in a limited world. Thus "humour may be defined as the sense within us which sets up a kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the expression of that sense in art".² Not only is the comic hero's confrontation with an unfriendly universe and the corresponding comedy depicted; but also are presented the numerous peculiarities of other men and women, their oddities and angularities in doing the various

transactions of life. The Malgudi reality is based on stable social values so as to contain their irregularities, their occasional eruptions of passions and emotions. The thousand small comedies of man's dreams and aspirations, of his revolts and retreats, glow in their typical humanness, against the backdrop of the intimate and eternal presence of Malgudi. That in this docile yet vivacious setting of Malgudi, human suffering often has a humorous side, is illustrated by Narayan's delectable irony. It is because the religion of the comic asks to take pains and sufferings in one's stride and laugh at one's own self, as Raju and to a lesser extent Jagon do. By refusing to suffer in pain, They deny the supremacy of pain and assert their indomitable ego. Narayan's

comic vision not only deals with the joyous sides of life, but also with its serious and painful aspects. The odds of life are transmuted into meaningful experiences. In spite of the occasional sorrows and sufferings in the novels, Narayan's world does not present any picture of gloom and despair as the comic vision diffuses the assured warmth of life. Most of our problems are the result of our wrong understanding of this world and ourselves. Since disaster is not the ultimate fact in Narayan's fiction and since the Saryu river, the Taluk office gong, the Lawley statue, the puja rituals of the mother, the superstitions of the grandmother, and a lot of other things convey the sense of the inevitable and the eternal reality of Malgudi, the individual's absurd designs. and his corresponding sufferings

embarrassments appear funny deserving to be viewed with a sympathetic smile.

In a work of comic realism the fictional world must closely correspond to our impression of the real world. Minute details with regard to the way people eat their dress, worship, desire and a lot of other things are described so as to create the successful fictional illusions. As David Lodge comments:

Fictional characters are, therefore, provided with a context of particularity much like that with which we define ourselves and others in the real world; they have names, parents, possessions, occupations etc., ordered in such a way as not to violate our sense of probability derived from the empirical world.³

Since Narayan's main concern is not with any social documentation but with the depiction of the comic side of life, He has to provide an authentic locale in which he has to treat men and women in their various manners and moods. Rightly, therefore, he sharply chisels out his characters in terms of their particular individualities. These characters seldom fall into the category of 'types' and are distinctly marked out from one another by their individual ideas and idiosyncrasies. The characters as well as place Malgudi with its distinct features, like the river, the hills, etc., convey unmistakably the impression of a living existence. The Malgudi experience is brought home to the reader through what Ian Watt calls "the individualization of its character", and "the detailed presentation of their

environment".⁴

In Narayan's fiction there is prolonged description of natural scenery. The topography has been rendered clear and vivid to the extent that it serves a meaningful role in human drama.

The Saryu river is as much associated with the childhood play of Swami and his friends as with Raju, Jagon, Raman, and so many others. Narayan is more concern with the details of human actions, and the small geographical descriptions provide necessary authenticity to these actions. The characters journey through time. The journey is very often focused in a biographical perspective that unfolds their movement from ignorance to knowledge in the comic frame work of the narrative.

In order to create a successful fictional illusion,

the locale is to be properly identified. Narayan provides all the details of a traditional society in transition - the age - old superstitions, gods and grandmothers, the cricket club, the film actress and the family planning. Simultaneously the values that sustain the Malgudi society are underscored implicitly as the plot advances. By the technique of "formal realism",⁵ Narayan provides authenticity as well as credibility to his creations.

In Narayan's human comedy a sort of librated awareness of life is inherent. This awareness is realized not through a moralizing stance, but through an aesthetically satisfying form and style that enable us to desire a meaning of life and things, for as Brooks and Warren suggest, "We do not like to be preached at,

but we do demand a sense of meaningfulness.”⁶

That there is a certain moral concern in Narayan's novel is generally accepted. A casual reading of his novels will acquaint us with what F.R. Leavis calls “a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity.”⁷ But the moral concern is not divorced from the form of the novel. Ordinary human transactions are transmuted into the beauty of living as these are described to us lucidly, with authentic circumstantial details, with ironic turn of events and undertones, and with a unique sense of good humour permeating even the odds of life.

Narayan's artistic touch is deft and deceptive. It has been alleged that he is nothing more than an acute observer. Have Western readers been too easily ‘amused’?

Is the comedy already in the material? Is the laughter of the Western readers patronizing? To say 'yes' is to underestimate Narayan's dead-pan skill as a delineator of the middle-class Indian hypocrisy, its social climbing and massive self-contradictory ethics. It is only too easy to mistake the deliberately understated nature of his comic plots, themes and characters. Where you expect satire you will find only comedy, perhaps because Narayan is fundamentally too good-natured a writer to be a satirist. One general reaction to R.K. Narayan's fiction is: "Oh, how real it is!" One feels that his works embody the reality of life in India so easily and adequately. For example, the opening scene in The Guide is at once realistic in tone and description. The foreign readers are particularly struck with the element

of social realism in Narayan's writing. The novelist has to stress time and again that his characters and situations belong to a work of fiction:

"Do brothers quarrel in India?" "Of course, brothers would quarrel anywhere in the world," I said, and delivered a long discourse on joint family living in India. About fifty answers, Always reminding the audience in conclusion that The Financial Expert was a work of fiction, not a treatise or a document, and the story was about an individual and was not portraying a type."⁸

R.K. Narayan concentrates on orthodox family and incorporates numerous features of Indian life. He deals with middle and lower-middle classes who constitute the

bulk of India's population. He studies various relationships in his novels, with family as the nucleus. There is a strong sense of kinship in his fiction, and the equation between Margayya and his brother in the Financial Expert is a telling example in point. It is patriarchal society where the father's influence is immense and all-pervasive. In Swami and Friends, the father is an archetype of all father-figure's in Narayan's later novels. Chandran's father in The Bachelor of Arts behaves like a medieval Knight. Ramani in The Dark Room is a tyrant who represents cruel men in India dominating over women.

Narayan's novel can be said to be in the pattern of the New Comedy. The individual traverses along a path of follies and misadventures seemingly throwing the

social stability into peril, and at last expiating for his blunders, returns to the fold of the society. In view of the absurd security of the Malgudi Society, the apparent disasters resulting from the unbridled impulses and instincts of the comic hero only serve to build up the comic tension. The narrative implies this sense of social security; and in the context of this awareness the erratic acts and adventures of characters in Narayan's fiction arouse laughter.

Narayan's stories have a specific fictional locale-Malgudi, an imaginary town in South India. Like Hardy's Wessex, Malgudi has a life of its own. However, Hardy shows the disappearance of rural mode of living and the urban culture impinging upon the rustic life, whereas Narayan describe both old and the

new existing side by side. There exists in his novels pastoral simplicity as well as contemporary complexity of life. The era of science and technology has set in, yet the old way of life has also its votaries. Margayya in The Financial Expert, for example, wishes to start again his old business under the banyan tree towards the close of the novel. Graham Greene aptly observes: "But the life of Malgudi-never ruffled by politics-proceeds in exactly the same way as it has done for centuries, and the juxtaposition of the age-old convention and the modern character provides much of the comedy."⁹

Man-woman relationship occupies an important place in Narayan's fiction. In The Bachelor of Arts, the Chandran-Malathi affair is warm and romantic. In The

Dark Room, however, the obvious movement is from a tragedy to a dramatic anti-climax. Savitri is not blind to the faults of her husband, though she meekly gives in and keeps quite. Srinivas in Mr. Sampath has no inclination for the normal husband and wife relationship and he does not hold it sacred. Shanti comes to live with him as his mistress, and he justifies his conduct: "Every sane man needs two wives- a perfect one for the house and a perfect one out for the social life. I have the one. Why not the other?"

Narayan has the keen eye, the tolerant mind and the compassionate heart which constitute the basic equipment of a true humorist. "Narayan's comic vision is one of his great gifts" and it enables him to perceive the comic and the incongruous in the ordinary. His

observation on two of his lovable child-characters in Swami and Friends, Swami and Samuel may well be taken as expressive of his own comic vision; "The bond between them was laughter. They were able to see together the same absurdities and incongruities in things. The most trivial and unnoticeable things to others would tackle them to death". Narayan has preserved this freshness of vision throughout his long creative career.

The basic comic situation in Narayan's novels is one of deviation from the normal. The Bachelor of Arts struck the first significant note of ironic comedy in the character of Chandran, and with each successive novel it grew into Narayan's signature. With Mr. Sampath, Narayan's comic genius became more manifest and in

The Financial Expert it blossomed into maturity. Then came The Guide, "a remarkable example of the especially difficult genre to which most of Narayan's works, belongs, the serious comedy".¹⁰

In the characters of Sampath, Margayya and Raju, Narayan presents his serious ironic comedy of protagonism. His "fine sense of the tragicomic" manifests itself in these remarkable novels. The element of fantasy which was noticable in The Bachelor of Arts grows to be an integral part of his comic vision in these novels.

The allegorical element finds its consummation in the 'puranic' mythical pattern of The Man-Eater of Malgudi, using the 'puranic' myth of Bhasmasura as the base, Narayan builds up a modern fable with vasu

as an embodiment of the demonic powers. His singular achievement consists in the texture of the novel which remains ironic and good humoured in spite of its complexion of a crime-thriller and a parable. Even the demonic character of Vasu, the 'Man-eater' is not without an element of the comical and the grotesque. The Vendor of Sweets is richly comic in the incongruities of its central character, Jagon, the aging Sweet-Vendor. The theme of juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, a recurring source of comedy in Narayan's fiction, is treated here in a comical-fantastic manner. The Painter of Signs gives an unmistakable evidence of Narayan's comic fecundity unimpaired by the passage of time. Its humour consists chiefly in his mocking treatment of sexual passion growing into an obsession. His stories,

which are of a piece with his novels, represent a rich variety of theme-situations-comic, ironical, tragic and supernatural.

The essence of Narayan's comedy as we have seen, is the psychological complexity of human nature. His critical acceptance of traditional and religious values enables him to see his characters in bright social and moral relief, while his comic method discriminates between the humane and the absurd. Although he satirizes pretentious and hypocritical attachments to traditional customs such as gastronomical rigidity, caste snobbery and religious ritual, or displays some of the absurd incongruities that result from a crude attempt to fuse reactionary convention and western progress, he frequently indicates that for the contemporary Indian

the traditional way provides the best guarantee of happiness and fulfilment. On the other hand, Narayan's comic view-point implies that for the Indian to achieve such contentment he needs to remain a bit of an eccentric at heart. The gentle quality of his comedy owes a great deal to the attractiveness he finds in eccentric human behaviour.

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2. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. II (London: Encyclopaedia Britannica Ltd. 1956), p. 885.
3. David Lodge, Language of Fiction, p.42.
4. Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel, p.18.
5. Ibid., p.32. Watt notes here thus: "Formal realism, in fact, is the narrative embodiment of a premise that Defoe and Richardson accepted very literally, but which is implicit in the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is, therefore, under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions,

details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms.”(p.32).

6. Brooks and Warren, Understanding Fiction, p.82.

7. F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (Peregrine Books, 1962), p.17

8. My Dateless Diary, p.49.

9. Graham Greene, Introduction to The Financial Expert, p.7.

10. William Walsh, “Sweet Mangoes and Malt Vineger”, Indo-English Literature, ed. by K.K. Sharma (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan)p.129.

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